



**TESTIMONY OF
STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA**

**BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

HEARING ON THE TOPIC OF:

**“IDENTIFYING CONGRESSIONAL AND ADMINISTRATION
PRIORITIES FOR THE NEXT CONGRESS: HOW WE CAN SUPPORT
OUR VETERANS THROUGH AND AFTER COVID-19”**

DECEMBER 8, 2020



Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for allowing Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit testimony on identifying veteran-supporting priorities for the next Congress and Administration.

Established in 2008, SVA is a national nonprofit founded to empower student veterans as they transition to civilian life by providing them with the resources, network support, and advocacy needed to succeed in higher education and beyond. SVA serves 750,000 student veterans through a global network of more than 1,500 on-campus Chapters across the U.S. and in three countries overseas. aiming to inspire yesterday's warriors by connecting student veterans with a community of like-minded chapter leaders. Every day these passionate leaders work to provide the necessary resources, network support, and advocacy to ensure student veterans can effectively connect, expand their skills, and ultimately achieve their greatest potential.

Edward Everett, our nation's 20th Secretary of State, and the former President of Harvard University was famously quoted as stating, "Education is a better safeguard of liberty than a standing army." While we have the finest military that the world has ever known, the sentiment remains; the importance of education to our nation's national security continues to be critical. SVA believes today's student veterans are tomorrow's leaders and through their success, they serve as the ambassadors of the all-volunteer force.

o

Outstanding 2020 Legislative Priorities

We greatly appreciate the effort and attention put into the many legislative packages this Subcommittee has led in the 116th Congress. While we know time is running short, we consider the following bills our "holiday wish list" and look forward to working together to clear as many as possible before this Congress adjourns. For those issues that are not resolved this year, we also hope to work closely with respective sponsoring offices to reintroduce any remaining provisions or bills early in the new Congress.

Veteran Benefits Enhancement and Expansion Act, S 4511. This bill fulfills several of SVA's longest standing policy priorities, including expanding in-state tuition requirements, delaying Montgomery GI Bill election, and expansion of VA work-study options. SVA strongly supports this bill as it will reduce the confusion of each state having its own in-state tuition policies for a federal benefit and reduce the current "tax on troops" that is rarely used but frequently paid into Montgomery GI Bill.

Pandemic Assistance for Student Veterans Act, HR 8483. We greatly appreciate the dedication by this Subcommittee and its staffs to address a number of emergency issues related to the GI Bill during the COVID-19 response.¹ We hope to see this third bill finalized to address remaining issues specific to mitigating circumstances, on-the-job training, and ensuring benefit payment when a program is drastically modified because of COVID-19.

¹ Shane, Leo. "GI Bill Protections Extended For Student Veterans Dealing with Campus Coronavirus Changes." *Military Times*. 5 October 2020. <https://www.militarytimes.com/education-transition/2020/10/05/gi-bill-protections-extended-for-student-veterans-dealing-with-campus-coronavirus-changes/>

DELIVER Act, HR 7105. While much of this bill addresses other areas of veteran benefits, we strongly support the provisions specific to education such as additional VET TEC funds, TAP classes off base, and the grant program for organizations providing transition assistance. Additionally, The Veterans Rapid Retraining Program in particular could serve as a vital program to help with the country's economic recovery.

Protect the GI Bill Act, HR 4625. This robust bill encompasses a number of student protections aimed at preventing institutions of higher learning from preying on student veterans and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits. This bill is widely supported by a diverse coalition of organizations and has tediously worked its way through the legislative process thanks to the staffs of this Subcommittee and the Senate counterparts. Sending this bill to the president will ensure we enter 2021, and the future of higher education, with key protections student veterans and the American taxpayer have long awaited.

COVID Specific Concerns and Data

As the pandemic unfolded in earnest in early March, we became aware of several issues that would significantly and negatively impact student veterans and their families across the country. When we, and others in the veteran advocacy community, raised these issues to Congress, Members, including many on this Subcommittee, and their staff responded quickly to put together a patchwork of solutions to rectify many of these unintended oversights. We are grateful for the efforts of all involved to protect the hundreds of thousands of student veterans and families across the country that were at risk of losing the roof over their heads, tuition payments, and more. Indeed, some of our first recommendations for the incoming Congress are to review and study the emergency needs specific to the GI Bill uncovered during the COVID-19 response and take a two-prong approach to preventing the mass confusion and concern experienced this year for future national emergencies.

First, as an immediate assurance, Congress should consider codifying the flexibilities and protections created earlier this year that can be activated immediately when a national emergency is declared. While we greatly appreciate how quickly and effectively Congress responded to significant needs of student veterans this year, these course corrections were necessary to preserve the basic integrity of the educational benefits system and it makes little sense to reopen these types of wounds again in future emergencies. Learning from our shared history from 2020 will prevent the need for such herculean efforts and allow for more effective GI Bill governing in the midst of an emergency in the near future. Second, and an admittedly much larger and long-term effort, we know the patchwork of flexibilities and protections created this year are just that, a patchwork, and inherently not perfect. A more sustainable and dependable GI Bill administration system should also be studied to identify ways we can make the GI Bill work more seamlessly within the higher education system.

In addition to the immediate legislative needs stemming from COVID-19, to better understand the ripple effects of the pandemic, we have surveyed veterans across the country for the past several months on a variety of topics, including their thoughts on the pandemic, the realities of how it continues to impact them, and what problems remain. While we will gladly share the entirety of the data with any interested office, we did want to highlight a few areas of importance:

- Roughly half of respondents shared their monthly income is either not enough to pay bills or leaves little left over after paying bills.
- Nearly six in ten student veteran parents report an issue with loss of childcare or school closures negatively impacting their ability to work.

- More than eighty percent have some concern about COVID-19 impacting their academic goals or delaying progress towards a degree or certificate.
- Roughly one third responded with concern they would not have a job in the next three months.
- More than eighty percent have a pessimistic view of the economy.
- Nearly seventy percent believe COVID-19 will be over and behind us in a year or more.

The overall takeaway is that student veterans, like all Americans, continue to need assurances and support to navigate such uncertain times. From immediate worries of being able to stay in their homes, to anxiety over what the future holds, student veterans and their families have concerns that reach far beyond any single program within VA. To recover from the challenges of this year and empower our veterans to excel post-service and post-pandemic, it is critically important that veterans receive assistance from, and build confidence in, the entire gamut of programs VBA offers. In other words, as the Independent Budget (IB) organizations stated in their policy recommendations for the 116th Congress, “This nation should have as much focus on the economic opportunities for veterans as it does for their health care and benefits”.²

As veterans look towards the agency for hope after this year’s struggles, the front door to VA must remain open and welcoming to all. To strengthen veterans’ trust in the agency, their first interaction must be positive. After all, first impressions are the most important, and what is the first step in a veteran’s journey with VA, according to VA? The GI Bill.^{3,4}

2021: GI Bill as the Front Door to VA

The veteran advocacy community has largely focused on the implementation of the Forever GI Bill and increasing protections against fraud, waste, and abuse as we continue to expand educational opportunities for veterans over the last few years. Looking forward to 2021 and beyond, SVA is committed to the next phase of thinking about the GI Bill and elevating the voices of student veterans and their everyday needs.

The majority of our policy priorities stem from direct interactions with student veterans at our annual Regional Summits, Leadership Institute, Washington Week and National Conference. Our 2021 National Conference will be held virtually February 19-20 and is shaping up to have record-breaking student veteran attendance. We look forward to gathering and finalizing our full list of legislative priorities soon after it concludes and sharing those priorities with this Subcommittee early in the 117th Congress.

However, based on what we have already heard from student veterans in recent years and months, we are committed to our priorities having a central theme: the GI Bill is the ‘front door’ to VA. Typically, using the GI Bill is one of the first interactions a newly transitioned veteran will have with VA in the universe of post-service benefits and programs.^{5,6} This means a seamless GI Bill process is key to establishing trust and confidence in the agency

² Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. The Independent Budget –Veterans Agenda for the 116th Congress. Retrieved from: http://www.independentbudget.org/pdf/IndependentBudget_2019.pdf.

³ <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Veteran-Journey-Map.pdf>

⁴ Department of Veterans Affairs, *Your VA Welcome Kit*. <<https://www.va.gov/files/2020-11/va-welcome-kit-color.pdf>>

⁵ Department of Veterans Affairs, *Journeys of Veterans Map*. <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Veteran-Journey-Map.pdf>

⁶ Department of Veterans Affairs, *VA Welcome Kit*. <https://www.va.gov/welcome-kit/>



with every veteran they serve. Much like Veterans Health Administration's (VHA) 'Whole Health' concept for treating the entirety of a veteran, SVA advocates for a 'Whole Benefits' approach for modernizing VA Education Services.

First, instead of the piecemeal upgrades of the past, we recommend a full-scale digitizing of the GI Bill through wholesale IT infrastructure upgrades. Put simply, veterans deserve nothing less than the full implementation of an idea the veteran advocacy community calls the "Digital GI Bill." To meet the needs of our veterans, VA Education Service platforms must become a system that can adapt and change with the evolving landscape of higher education.

The pandemic strained every level of the education benefits system, from student veterans and schools to VA and Congress, and laid bare many structural weaknesses that jeopardize the safety and security of those we serve. It reaffirmed our belief that repeatedly stacking patchwork solutions on top of Veterans Benefits Administration's (VBA) piecemeal IT systems creates a teetering tower of benefits, each layer edging the tower just *a little bit closer* to toppling over completely. Without significant, dedicated funding to completely overhaul the underlying information technology infrastructure for benefits delivery at VA, we continue leaving student veterans and exposed to potential systemic disruptions like we saw this year.

The idea is a big one, but it begins with perfecting all the small steps in the process along the way. With an overhaul of VBA's IT systems, the agency can improve customer service to veterans calling into the GI Bill call center with faster response times, expand communication avenues via text, chat, and email, quickly respond to beneficiaries' questions, calculate benefits accurately and in a more timely manner, digitize eligibility certificates to reduce wait times, reduce the lag time between applying for benefits and receiving the first tuition and housing payments, and much more. All of this is asked with an eye on improving the experience of veterans and being a better steward of taxpayers' dollars through increased efficiencies, process improvement, and streamlining.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable effort by VBA to deliver timelier, customer-focused benefits to student veterans. Increasing their capacity to more efficiently address the needs of student veterans will only compound the great work already underway. The effects will be felt immediately, as veterans across the country will see these improvements with their first interaction, and long after, as well. At SVA, we often say student veterans are the ambassadors to military service. Similarly, the quality of VA's service to student veterans is the ambassador to all VA services. We look forward to focusing on this concept, along with the VA and our veteran advocate counterparts, in the next Congress.

Second, as mentioned above, we strongly support the need to study and understand how the GI Bill can better integrate within the higher education system to prevent the mass concern student veterans faced this year. Student veterans, and how their education interacts with government agencies, sit at a crossroads between VA and Department of Education. While historically this intersection has been manageable, the pandemic has exposed deep friction points worth further review.

Student veterans experienced unique frustrations and concerns in the pandemic response, even with the generous flexibilities created by this Congress and the quick support shown by VBA. Unlike their civilian counterparts, student veterans were nearly wholly dependent on schools accurately understanding rapidly changing VA guidance and considering GI Bill regulations when making decisions for entire student populations. As we saw, even decisions that appeared common sense had drastic and almost catastrophic implications for students using VA benefits. To be fair, school administrators were facing unprecedented decision requirements

and were making decisions for thousands of people at once. Similarly, it is important to recognize that VBA is only one part of the overall system and can only operate under its current requirements and authorities.

The entirety of the experience we as a collective community—from advocates, congressional staff, school administrators, VA, and most importantly to student veterans—have faced this year beg the need to thoroughly review how we can reduce the complexities of how the GI Bill interacts with higher education administration. We do not have the exact answers today, but ensuring we are working toward a more effortless relationship between the two systems while still respecting the unique needs of GI Bill administration, can help prevent the type of emergency situation many student veterans found themselves in this year.

In addition, SVA will continue to support the outstanding policies outlined in our annual policy priorities that improve the daily lives of student veterans and their families, increase efficacy of government programs used by student veterans such as closing the 90-10 loophole, push for greater data transparency, and elevate the success and value of an educated veteran population.⁷ We look forward to working with this Subcommittee and the whole of Congress to better serve and support our student veterans.

o

The continued success of veterans in higher education in the Post-9/11 era is no mistake or coincidence. SVA has spent significant resources over the past decade researching and gathering data on student veterans. Led by Dr. Chris Cate, the premier researcher and academic focused on the GI Bill, our team has produced the Million Records Project (MRP), the National Veterans Education Success Tracker Project (NVEST), the Life Cycle Atlas, and more to inform the public, stakeholders, policy makers, and others on the concerns of student veterans and military-connected students through empirical research.

It is through this work that we can tell you exactly who student veterans are. Ninety percent of student veterans using the GI Bill are prior enlisted, while the remaining ten percent are prior warrant and commissioned officers. Eighty-four percent are over the age of twenty-five. Nearly half are married, and half have children; eighteen percent are single parents. Fifty-five percent of student veterans work while enrolled with sixteen percent of those working multiple jobs.

They are also succeeding. As a cohort, student veterans have one of the highest grade point averages, highest success rates towards obtaining a degree, and some of the most competitive degrees with STEM, healthcare, and business as the top three majors.⁸ At SVA we use the term, “the best of a generation.” In our nation’s history, educated veterans have always been the best of a generation and the key to solving whatever problems our nation faces. This is the legacy we know today’s student veterans carry.

We thank the Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee for your time, attention, and devotion to the cause of veterans in higher education. As always, we welcome your feedback and questions, and we look forward to continuing to work with this Subcommittee and the entire Congress to ensure the success of all generations of veterans through education.

⁷ https://studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/SVA_PolicyOneSheet_2020-1.pdf

⁸ Cate, C.A. Student Veteran Census Survey 2018. Student Veterans of America, Washington, D.C.