

STATEMENT OF
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VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES
BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
WITH RESPECT TO
Pending Legislation

Washington, D.C.

April 14, 2021

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, and members of the subcommittee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and its Auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to provide our remarks on legislation pending before this subcommittee.

Draft Bill, Value Added Homes for Veterans Act

The VFW supports this legislation, which would permit veterans who are purchasing a home with a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) loan to submit an energy efficiency report to offset regular expenses for the home calculated in the debt-to-income ratio. This commonsense bill would improve the accuracy of energy supply cost estimates for VA home loans. It would also permit veterans to obtain a home loan using a better analysis of an individual's financial circumstances.

H.R. 147, Bringing Registered Apprenticeships to Veterans Education (BRAVE) Act

The VFW supports this legislation, which would require the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) curriculum to provide information to separating service members regarding apprenticeships. Department of Labor data indicate that the number of apprentice programs in the United States has increased precipitously since 2009. Apprenticeships provide a high-quality career pathway and permit individuals to develop new skills, obtain paid work experience, and receive portable credentials. Accordingly, including information about apprenticeships in the TAP program would help veterans make informed decisions regarding their post-service employment.

Draft Bill, Homeless Veterans Credit Repair, Enhancement, and Debt Improvement for Tomorrow (CREDIT) Act

The VFW supports this legislation, which would require VA to conduct a study on the effect of financial and credit counseling for homeless veterans and veterans experiencing housing instability. This initiative would provide additional data regarding the efficacy of measures to remove financial and credit barriers to housing. It would also permit VA to tailor programs designed to assist homeless veterans on the basis of outcome-driven data.

Discussion Draft to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide educational assistance under the Post-9/11 Educational Assistance Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs to students who are rounding out during their final semester, term, or academic period, and for other purposes

The VFW supports this proposal, which would permit veterans who are rounding out during their final semester to continue receiving VA education benefits. Many student veterans take nontraditional or irregular course loads per semester in order to balance their various responsibilities. Others begin a new course of study after military service with some academic credit obtained during prior attendance. Accordingly, some student veterans end up taking less than a half-time course load during their final semester. This legislation would permit student veterans to take an additional course that is not required for degree completion during their final semester in order to continue receiving their VA education benefits.

Discussion Draft to provide for extensions of the time limitations for use of entitlement under Department of Veterans Affairs educational assistance programs by reason of school closures due to emergency and other situations, and for other purposes

The VFW supports this proposal, which would temporarily suspend the deadline associated with the use of chapter 30 and chapter 33 education benefits in the event that an educational institution is temporarily or permanently closed by reason of an emergency situation. The VFW has long stated that VA education benefits should not be subject to eligibility or use deadlines. This legislation would suspend such deadlines for students whose programs of study are interrupted by a natural disaster or other emergency.

Draft Bill, G.I. and Veterans Education Empowerment (GIVE) Act

The VFW has not heard any feedback regarding this issue from its members. However, we are generally supportive of efforts to improve the GI Bill Comparison Tool so that veterans can make better decisions regarding the use of their education benefits.

Discussion Draft to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide or assist in providing an additional vehicle adapted for operation by disabled individuals to certain eligible persons, and for other purposes

The current adaptive automobile grant for disabled veterans is an incredible benefit for those who need this program. VA is authorized to provide a one-time grant of \$21,488.29 to a veteran

who is unable to drive due to a service-connected disability. This grant may be used for the purchase of a specially equipped automobile. However, the one-time use of this grant does not take into account modern vehicular needs for veterans and vehicles in the 21st century. The VFW supports the intent of this legislation and has a recommendation to improve it.

A single-use grant for vehicle adaptations is not enough considering the average American owns multiple vehicles in their lifetime. Veterans who have previously received a grant must pay any expenses associated with the purchase of a new vehicle themselves. The cost of replacing a modified automobile with a used or new vehicle ranges from \$21,000 to \$65,000, which is a substantial sum for most consumers. These substantial costs, coupled with inflation, present a financial hardship for many disabled veterans who need to replace their primary mode of transportation once it reaches its life of service.

The VA automobile allowance and adaptive equipment program was created to assist eligible veterans and service members with a service-connected disability to purchase a specially equipped vehicle. Accordingly, the VFW cannot support Section 3 of this discussion draft, which would permit veterans with a non-service-connected disability to receive a grant under this program.

Draft Bill, Native VetSuccess at Tribal Colleges and Universities Pilot Program Act

The VFW supports this legislation, which would create a Native VetSuccess at Tribal Colleges and Universities pilot program. The VetSuccess program exists on more than 100 college campuses and the positive feedback from those who have benefited from this program is incredible. Employment and education are major issues in tribal areas and a VetSuccess on campus program would greatly benefit those veterans attending schools in tribal areas.

American Indians and Alaska Natives serve in the military at a disproportionately high rate. An unfortunate reality for too many of our brother and sister veterans living in tribal areas is they face difficulties such as unemployment, homelessness, and food insecurity at a higher rate than their counterparts living outside of tribal areas. The Native VetSuccess at Tribal Colleges and Universities pilot program would help tribal veterans, service members, and eligible dependents succeed and thrive on campus and prepare them to enter the labor market in viable careers.

Discussion Draft to eliminate the time period for eligibility under Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance Program of Department of Veterans Affairs

The VFW supports this proposal, which would eliminate the 10-year deadline under chapter 35 for educational assistance for individuals made eligible by the disability of a spouse. We have long held the view that education and employment are lifelong needs. Accordingly, veterans and eligible survivors and dependents must have the option to use their VA education and training benefits for life. This important bill would create parity between chapter 35 benefits and other VA education programs and is an important step toward removing all unnecessary delimiting dates.

Discussion Draft to implement a modern information technology service to process claims for educational assistance under chapters 30, 33, 35, and 36 of title 38, United States Code

The VFW supports this proposal, which would require VA to modernize its information technology (IT) service to process claims for educational assistance. The IT infrastructure of VA has had shortcomings for years. Sometimes there have been minor delays or hurdles in processing claims or benefits, and sometimes there have been catastrophic failures such as the GI Bill housing payment issue in the fall of 2018. It does not matter how capable and dedicated the employees at VA are, if VA is not equipped with adequate IT resources to perform its required tasks, there will inevitably be breakdowns.

Last year, the VFW proposed the “Digital GI Bill” to upgrade IT platforms and bring VA’s Education Services into the 21st century. Congress recently heeded our concerns and appropriated funds to effectuate this overhaul. This legislation would create important milestones for VA in its implementation of this initiative, as well as reporting requirements to ensure transparency of the process.

Discussion Draft to direct the Assistant Secretary of Labor for Veterans’ Employment and Training to carry out a pilot program on short-term fellowship programs for veterans

The VFW supports this proposal, which would create a pilot program to provide short-term fellowships for veterans at nonprofit organizations. This initiative would provide opportunities for veterans to receive valuable training and experience at organizations that further a social cause or provide a public benefit. Furthermore, it would create public service employment opportunities for veterans.

Discussion Draft to establish in the Department the Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration, and for other purposes

The VFW supports this proposal, which would establish the Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration in the Department of Veterans Affairs. VA is comprised of three administrations—the National Cemetery Administration (NCA), the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), and the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). VBA is in charge of not only compensation and pension, but also the GI Bill, vocational rehabilitation, housing and business loans, and the broadly defined transition assistance program, which is shared with the Departments of Labor, Defense, and Homeland Security.

The VFW believes our nation’s focus on the economic opportunities of our veterans must be permanent. In reality, not all veterans seek VA health care when they are discharged, they do not need assistance from the NCA, and they do not all seek disability compensation. However, the vast majority are looking for gainful employment and/or education. Congress should recognize the value of these programs by separating them into their own administration focused solely on their utilization and growth.

The VFW has long proposed that Congress create a fourth administration under VA with its own undersecretary whose sole responsibility is the economic opportunity programs. This legislation

would permit the new Secretary of Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration to refocus resources, provide a champion for these programs, and create a central point of contact for Veterans Service Organizations and Congress. This would ensure that the GI Bill, Veteran Readiness and Employment, home loans, and other economic opportunity centered benefits receive the attention they deserve.

Draft Bill, Affordable Housing for Homeless Veterans Act of 2021

The VFW supports this legislation, which would improve existing homeless programs to provide for long-term or permanent veteran housing. VA and the Department of Housing and Urban Development have made great strides toward eliminating veteran homelessness. The Annual Homeless Assessment Report for 2020 indicates that the current number of homeless veterans is less than 40,000. This is a significant improvement from 2010 when the number of homeless veterans was 74,087. This legislation would further reduce veteran homelessness by offering more options for permanent housing solutions.

Discussion Draft to provide for the disapproval by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs of courses of education offered by public institutions of higher learning that do not charge veterans the in-state tuition rate for purposes of Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance Program

The VFW supports this proposal, which would require VA to disapprove programs of education for payment of benefits under chapter 35 at public institutions of higher learning if the school charges tuition and fees in excess of the rate for resident students. This bill would expand the requirements of the *Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014* (P.L. 113-146) for individuals receiving benefits under chapter 35. This commonsense protection should exist for all recipients of VA education benefits at public institutions, regardless of whether they are a veteran, dependent, or survivor.

Draft Bill to increase the amount authorized to be appropriated for the high technology pilot program of the Department of Veterans Affairs

The VFW supports this legislation, which would commit additional funding to the Veterans Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) pilot program. VET TEC is an incredibly popular program that permits eligible veterans to receive valuable training in computer software and programming, data processing, information science, and media applications. Indeed, the program is so popular that all available seats for 2021 were filled within one month of the application opening for the new year. Accordingly, it is necessary to ensure that adequate funds are appropriated so that every eligible veteran who is interested in the VET TEC program may participate.

Draft Bill, Protecting the Employment Rights of Servicemembers Act

The VFW supports this legislation, which would provide additional procedural protections under the *Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act of 1994* (USERRA). We

generally support efforts to ensure that service members are not disadvantaged in their civilian careers because of their military service.

Chairman Levin, this concludes my testimony. I am prepared to answer any questions you or the subcommittee members may have.

Information Required by Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, the VFW has not received any federal grants in Fiscal Year 2021, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.

The VFW has not received payments or contracts from any foreign governments in the current year or preceding two calendar years.