

**STATEMENT OF RONALD BURKE  
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VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION (VBA)  
BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**MAY 26, 2021**

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore and other members of the Subcommittee, we appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss Veteran employment amid the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Accompanying me today are Cheryl Rawls, Executive Director, Outreach, Transition and Economic Development Service, VBA, and Charmain Bogue, Executive Director, Education Service, VBA.

### **Economic Development Initiatives**

VA understands that economic well-being for the Veteran community requires partners from across the Veteran ecosystem to come together to improve opportunities and create long-term economic sustainability. To meet this need, VA launched Economic Development Initiatives (EDI), which connects Transitioning Service members (TSM), newly separated Veterans and military spouses in specific geographic communities with information and resources that promote economic well-being. Such resources can include Town Hall meetings, Partner Roundtables, Benefits Fairs, Claims Clinics, Hiring Fairs and workshops.

Since November, 2018, in collaboration with Federal, State and local government partners, Veterans Service Organizations and private partners, VA has held in-person EDIs in Puerto Rico and Puget Sound, Washington, and has also held virtual EDIs during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Houston and San Antonio, Texas areas, and in Jacksonville, North Carolina. This fiscal year, VA plans to hold both in-person and virtual EDIs in Maricopa, Arizona in August, and Baltimore, Maryland in September. Through our partnership with the Department of Labor (DOL), we have connected State workforce agencies to integrate employment services and resources into EDI events.

### **Public/Private Partnerships**

VA believes in strong partnerships with Federal, State, local and non-governmental partners to help Veterans and their families achieve economic well-being. As such, VA recently solidified its longstanding partnership with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Hiring our Heroes (HOH) initiative through a Memorandum of Agreement. The partnership between VA and HOH builds upon previous collaborative efforts to increase employment opportunities for TSMs, military spouses, Veterans and their families.

Additionally, in January 2021, VA partnered with a non-governmental organization to provide TSMs, Veterans, their families and caregivers access to financial wellness resources to improve their economic well-being and help them reach financial stability at no cost. As part of this partnership, TSMs, Veterans, their families and caregivers have access to a Digital Financial Portal as well as in-person and virtual financial education seminars covering a broad range of financial topics. Financial literacy helps build a stronger understanding of personal finances that in-turn will strengthen individuals and families as they live productive lives while in the military and as they transition to civilian life. VA plans to expand these kinds of partnerships in the future. We also want to highlight the ongoing value of our partnership with DOL and its Veterans' Employment and Training Service, the Federal government's lead agency on Veterans' employment. Our ongoing collaboration through the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), and post TAP employment efforts results in stronger employment outcomes for veterans than we could achieve separately.

### **Personalized Career Planning and Guidance**

On January 4, 2021, to support Service members, Veterans and all eligible beneficiaries with their academic and career endeavors, VA launched the rebranded Chapter 36-Educational and Career Counseling program, now known as Personalized Career Planning and Guidance (PCPG). PCPG provides beneficiaries with enhanced career counseling, assessment, education planning and guidance resources to achieve personal, career and education goals. VA is proud to announce that as of May 10, 2021, we received nearly 4,501 PCPG counseling applications. VA has enhanced PCPG outreach to highlight Veteran and family member eligibility and to encourage PCPG benefits usage multiple times across their military to civilian and/or career lifespan for as long as they remain eligible. To be eligible for PCPG, a beneficiary must be: a Service member who is six months or less from separation; a Veteran who has transitioned from active-duty service in the last year; or, a Veteran or beneficiary eligible to use a VA educational benefit.

Through this enhanced benefit, eligible participants are empowered to reach their educational and career goals through personalized education and career guidance. Due to COVID-19, PCPG approved the use of tele-counseling by contractors. This change allows for the continuation of services and expansion to beneficiaries who reside overseas, ensuring overall program success. Beneficiaries have reported satisfaction with receiving PCPG benefits via tele-counseling; therefore, VA is currently updating program policy to include the option of tele-counseling in the future.

### **SkillBridge**

To support Service members entering VA careers, VA SkillBridge successfully launched in February 2020. VA SkillBridge is the organizing umbrella for programs across VA designed to provide Active Duty TSMs with employment training, internship and apprenticeship opportunities during their last 180 days of service. The program provides TSMs with valuable civilian work experience to better prepare them for post-

separation employment. VA SkillBridge is executed in partnership with the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) via the December 2019 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) formalizing VA's role as a Federal employment partner organization supporting the DoD SkillBridge program. VA, in collaboration with the DoD SkillBridge team, provides consultative support to VA organizations developing and implementing VA SkillBridge programs. As of May 11, 2021, VA had 16 organizations either established or interested in establishing a VA SkillBridge program for TSMs under the MOU.

VA SkillBridge encountered some challenges during the pandemic, where large cohorts at installation training facilities were shut down, such as the VA Security Service Training facility in Arkansas and Warrior Training Advancement Course classrooms on three DoD installations, including Fort Stewart, Fort Hood and Fort Carson. To ensure continuation of the program, VA instituted virtual curriculums. VA will continue to support VA SkillBridge programs with developing marketing materials tailored to drive program participation interest via virtual engagements with TSMs, in lieu of the traditional installation-level engagement. Additionally, in an effort to ensure TSMs know about VA SkillBridge, we require our VA Benefits Advisors to discuss this career readiness opportunity during the "Getting Career Ready" module of the VA Transition Assistance Program Benefits and Services course.

## **Veteran Readiness and Employment**

The Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) program is authorized under title 38, United States Code, and is referred to as the Chapter 31 program. It assists entitled Veterans and Service members with a 10% or more service-connected disability rating and an employment handicap to prepare for, obtain and maintain suitable employment.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, VR&E Service has developed a new modernization initiative to provide a structured and standardized approach to employment services. The new model is aimed at creating business partnerships with Federal, state and private companies. As part of this model, VR&E Service is renaming the current Employment Coordinators to Regional Office Business Account Managers, to align with industry employment standards. The name change will include a change in the position description which will focus on business partnerships, marketing and consulting to increase the number of job opportunities for Veterans. To share best practices and assist program participants with securing employment during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, VR&E Service has instituted monthly collaboration sessions with the Regional Office Business Account Managers.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2019, VR&E completed 10,939 employment rehabilitations. Since March 2020, VR&E Service has shared over 1,250 job leads and/or events with VR&E field staff. This has contributed to over 9,500 employment rehabilitations for FY 2020 and over 6,400 employment rehabilitations year-to-date for FY 2021, with a projection of over 10,000 employment rehabilitations by the end of FY 2021.

Since March 2020, VR&E Service has shared over 450 virtual employment events with VR&E field staff. In August 2020, VR&E Service collaborated with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Animal Plant Health Inspection Service, on a national job fair exclusively for VR&E Veterans through non-competitive hiring. Over 700 VR&E Veterans and Service members registered for the event, with 354 applications submitted for 49 vacancies. Over 120 of the VR&E applicants were referred to hiring managers.

VR&E Service has created several MOUs focusing on Non-Paid-Work Experience (NPWE) in an effort to further assist VR&E Veterans toward employment opportunities with Government entities. Some of the MOUs were developed with the U.S. Department of Transportation; U.S. Department of Homeland Security; U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; U.S. Department of Agriculture; and the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation. VR&E was able to develop 688 NPWE opportunities in FY 2020 and has created 324 NPWE opportunities in FY 2021 year-to-date.

VR&E Service also has continued its longstanding relationship with DOL, focusing on the areas of job placement services and the provision of targeted labor market information. This partnership has expanded to DOL's Office of Apprenticeship, and the Office of Disability Employment Policy, which has helped increase the utilization of Registered Apprenticeships within the VR&E program and has resulted in Apprenticeship Pilots at six VR&E regional offices.

## **Conclusion**

The Administration appreciates the efforts of the Congress to ensure that Veterans and their families have strong economic outcomes. VA will continue to strengthen our initiatives to achieve this goal.

This concludes my testimony. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today, and we are happy to answer any questions you may have.