

TESTIMONY OF
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CODE PLATOON

BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

WITH RESPECT TO VET TEC & VRRAP
"SECURING HIGH-DEMAND JOBS FOR VETERANS"

FEBRUARY 2, 2022

Good morning Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore and Members of the Committee. Thank you for inviting me here to discuss the VA's funding programs for technology and other high-demand jobs.

Introduction

My name is Alicia Boddy, and I am the Chief Development and Operations Officer for Code Platoon. I also serve as our School Certifying Official. That is, I complete all of the electronic filings to the VA and am the point of contact for both the VA and students.

Code Platoon is a nonprofit coding bootcamp with a mission to train the Military Community (Veterans, transitioning Active Duty, and Military Spouses) to become professional software developers. Coding bootcamps, or code schools, refer to a newer training model whereby students are taught in-demand software development skills, often in an intense and typically condensed time frame. Most coding bootcamps gear their programs towards high placement rates (70%+) in well-paying technical jobs.

Code Platoon was one of the first three providers approved to accept VET TEC in April of 2019. We are also approved to accept the GI Bill, VRRAP and Veteran Readiness & Employment benefits. Code Platoon hosts in-person classes in Chicago, as well as remote learning. We have trained over 230 students since our first class in 2016, including 85 VET TEC students but only 8 VRRAP students. We have seen a huge lack of awareness about VRRAP in the Military Community.

I am here in support of making both VET TEC and VRRAP permanent programs by combining the best parts of both. I will share the experience Code Platoon has had with these programs and where there are opportunities for improvement. More importantly, I will share stories from Code Platoon graduates whose lives and careers have been changed by VET TEC and VRRAP.

VET TEC Working Group

In the summer of 2019, I formed the VET TEC Working Group (VTWG). What started out as a call among 3-5 providers is now a standing monthly call with the majority of the 32 currently approved VET TEC providers attending. We are frequently joined by the VA's VET TEC processing team in Buffalo, who make it a priority to join these calls and provide updates. This relationship between providers and the VA has been vital to the overall success of VET TEC. By creating consistent and open lines of communication between providers and the team in Buffalo, we are often able to address problems quickly and help Veterans use the VET TEC program efficiently and effectively. A provider noted that these calls “are the best training we receive each month.”

Job Placement

Job placement is a key metric for VET TEC and VRRAP. The VA withholds 50% of the VET TEC tuition payment and 25% of the VRRAP tuition payment until the student finds meaningful employment, which is required within 180 days of graduation. Job placement and tracking has inherently been part of the design of code schools from their inception in 2011. These programs were designed to provide intense, immersive, short-term training that will lead directly to a job. Code schools routinely include job placement in their graduation outcome reports each year.

In fact, code schools formed an association to establish standards on job placement reporting, the Council on Integrity in Results Reporting ([CIRR](#)). Many VET TEC providers participate in CIRR and graduate outcomes are posted on CIRR's website. Code Platoon currently has a placement rate of 80%. During the pandemic, our graduating class from January 2021 had 100% job placement within 6 months of graduation. Today these students are working as software engineers with companies including JPMorgan Chase, Booz Allen Hamilton, and Cognizant. It is important to note that job placement rates have been the same or better for remote programs as in-person.

As one Code Platoon student shares, “VET TEC definitely was a great option for me because I could not do Code Platoon in-person and the GI Bill was not available for remote students. Their enrollment team helped guide me and I ended up getting approved for VET TEC and accepted into Code Platoon. Today, I am an associate engineer with Chicago Trading Company making \$125,000 per year. I would not be here without VET TEC and Code Platoon.”

Code schools commitment to job placement is a perfect match for VET TEC and VRRAP. Traditional colleges and technical schools may not have the same background and experience with job placement metrics. Job placement is a key metric to ensure these programs work, but several providers brought up issues with the implementation of this requirement on the January VTWG call. I expect some of those providers to submit Statements to this Committee. I hope

the Committee, the VA and providers can review the job placement requirement and implement improvements. This may explain the disparity between VET TEC and VRRAP providers.

VRRAP Approval

VRRAP approval is limited to programs that have VET TEC or GI Bill approval. To be approved for VET TEC, a school must not be accredited. However, most GI Bill approved schools are accredited universities, community and technical colleges. Most VET TEC providers pursued approval for VRRAP, but the vast majority of approved VRRAP programs are at universities, community and technical colleges. These schools appear to have gotten their entire portfolio of GI Bill approved programs approved for VRRAP.

For example, Somerset Community College has 885 programs, Ivy Tech Community College 734 and Strayer University 434. Even DeVry University, which had prior issues with its GI Bill approval, has over 170 VRRAP programs. There are also many 2-year associate programs approved (including one for Spanish). It is hard to understand how these programs will meet job placement metrics.

Community and technical colleges are undervalued and certainly play an important role in education and job training, but these schools generally do not have the same experience and commitment to job placement as code schools. That is not to say that these programs cannot be successful under VRRAP, but perhaps it could be more intentional to approve programs with a high demand for workers and greater likelihood of securing meaningful employment.

The beauty of VRRAP is that it expanded benefits to Veterans who did not have GI Bill entitlement, and it expanded training beyond technology to other high-demand jobs. There may be room for improvement in the program's implementation, but I absolutely support expanding the pool of eligible Veterans and including non-technology, high demand jobs.

VET TEC Approval

While I've noted the issue with VRRAP program approval above and how that may impact job placement, I'd like to discuss the VET TEC approval process as that was a particular struggle for many providers in 2021.

VET TEC providers must submit yearly school and program approvals to the VA. These approvals are in addition to the GI Bill approval schools are required to complete with their State Approving Agency (SAA) each year, as well as any state requirements (for instance, Code Platoon is also regulated by the Illinois Board of Higher Education). While I would love to discuss the demands and conflicts of these competing approvals, I'll focus on VET TEC.

VET TEC providers were required to submit 30+ pages of documentation to VET TEC's Approval Compliance & Liaison team (AC&L) by August 31, 2021. VET TEC funding is

available on October 1. That means AC&L only had 30 days to review these packets, as many schools had classes starting in October. This is an impossible deadline.

As of November 30, only 6 of the 32 providers had received feedback on their applications. That meant AC&L had to review and approve individual classes so schools could enroll students in October and November (this enrollment also triggers the housing payment to Veterans). This chaotic situation led to other issues (some submittals were lost, which resulted in the provider going to the end of the line as AC&L processes on a first-in, first-out basis). I will share a full write-up with staff that provides detailed examples.

During our January 2022 VTWG call held, the AC&L team announced that the approval process is undergoing considerable and meaningful updates. These changes will be implemented in direct response to feedback from providers during the FY 22 approval process. The updated approval process, effective March 2022, will alleviate much of the frustrations and delays previously experienced. This is a timely example of the power of collaboration between providers and the VET TEC AC&L and processing teams. I want to especially thank Bill Spruce, Darlene Graves, Sarahbeth Dean, and Peter Nastasi for their tireless efforts in working with the VTWG.

Budget and Veteran Eligibility

VET TEC was originally allotted \$15 million per fiscal year for the 5 year pilot. In FY 2021, this October 1 funding ran out November 5. Congress increased funding to \$45 million per fiscal year after this occurred. Even with the larger budget, the VET TEC program consistently exhausts our funding prior to the end of the fiscal year, leaving thousands of Veterans unable to participate in our training programs.

It is difficult for the VA to anticipate when the budget will be exhausted given the payment structure. This puts schools and Veterans in a difficult position. A school may have a class starting soon and then receive notice that funding is exhausted. Many code schools enroll students on a rolling basis, usually about 4-6 months before their class will actually start. This allows students to complete the necessary pre-work to be prepared for the pace of a coding bootcamp.

As one Code Platoon student shared, “My journey into professional software development started a year before my class at Code Platoon. As I was transitioning from an Active Duty service member into a Navy Veteran, I came across the VET TEC program on the Veterans Affairs Education website. The goal is to match Veterans with a leading training provider to help develop those high-tech skills to quickly be placed in a high-paying tech job. I found Code Platoon and started the application process.”

Code Platoon is currently enrolling students for our May 24 class, but we have no idea if funding will be available. While in-person VET TEC students can revert to their GI Bill, that is not an option for remote students, which is the majority of our current students.

In contrast, VRRAP was allotted \$386 million from March 2021 to December 2022. This budget has barely been spent. VET TEC students are not eligible for VRRAP, as VET TEC requires a Veteran to have GI Bill benefits while that is a disqualifying factor for VRRAP. A Veteran cannot be approved for both programs, even if they are unable to use VET TEC because of lack of budget.

As a short term solution, please consider moving \$45 million dollars from the VRRAP budget to the VET TEC budget immediately. This will allow providers to continue training Veterans through FY 2022. Beginning in FY 2023, VET TEC should be funded at \$125 million and receive the balance of VRRAP funding when that temporary program expires. VRRAP should be allowed to expire, as it was designed as part of Covid relief efforts. But, there is much we can learn and take from VRRAP to make a stronger and permanent VET TEC program.

If VRRAP and VET TEC are combined into one program, the requirement for a Veteran to have GI Bill benefits to qualify should be discontinued. The goal of this combined program should be to support Veterans who want to find meaningful employment in a condensed time frame, regardless of their GI Bill status. Approved programs should follow the VET TEC requirements of running 6 weeks to 28 weeks in length, ensuring that the VA is supporting short-term training programs designed to secure high-demand jobs. Non-college degree granting programs (NCDs) should be given priority over accredited universities and community colleges, given the amount of existing financial aid programs available to accredited schools.

The Future of VET TEC & VRRAP

By combining the best parts of VET TEC and VRRAP, you have the opportunity to meet Veterans where they are in finding meaningful employment in high-demand jobs. Many of our students have used the majority of their GI Bill but do not have a career. Programs like VET TEC and VRRAP are an important signal from the VA that you want to help. This is particularly important as we rebuild our economy post-coronavirus.

VET TEC and VRRAP are innovative tools to change the narrative on VA educational benefits. We can use these programs to focus on building the modern economy by filling high demand tech jobs through coding bootcamps and other short term or accelerated learning programs. This model of learning is the military model and approach that we know can work.

The payment structure to providers should remain as written for VRRAP if these programs are combined. Training providers expend an incredible amount of resources recruiting and training students into our programs. By receiving 75% of tuition by graduation, providers would have

more stability. Code schools in particular would continue to benefit with this streamlined payment structure, as we will always strive to place graduates in meaningful employment upon graduation.

If VET TEC and VRRAP are to be combined, it would be critical to only approve programs that have a positive impact and supporting data on finding Veterans meaningful employment through their training programs. Both in-person and remote programs should be approved as the data shows both types of training can lead to employment. The job placement metric and reporting should absolutely remain in place. Ideally, this data would be reported on the VA's GI Bill Comparison Tool or another VA website.

Code Platoon has been training remote students since 2018, with one recent graduate sharing, “I attended Code Platoon remotely from February to May 2021. Though my entire experience was remote, it did not detract from the immersive experience and overall quality education. In just a few short months, myself and others, all of whom were at different levels of experience, were able to go from writing simple “Hello World” scripts, to full-stack applications incorporating multiple 3rd party APIs. Overall, I can’t recommend this program enough to any Veteran!”

These suggested updates would ensure that VET TEC remains successful, providers who are committed to the mission of VET TEC are rewarded with timely approvals and most importantly, Veterans are able to participate in a program that is fully funded for the entire fiscal year.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to share my experience with VET TEC and VRRAP. I have seen first hand the impact these programs are having on our Veterans. One Code Platoon graduate recently shared, *“If you teach a Veteran to code they can support themselves and their families for a lifetime. Code Platoon, through their training program, is re-mobilizing Veterans with a sense of purpose and you can’t put a price tag on that.”*

VET TEC and VRRAP are important tools to help Veterans secure high-demand jobs in tech. Allowing remote training coupled with the job placement metric is key to ensuring these programs are effective, sustainable and the funds are wisely spent. I look forward to working with you and the VA to improve these programs and enable the Military Community to transition to high-demand jobs. For questions about this testimony, you may contact me at 312-560-3003 or alicia@codeplatoon.org. This concludes my testimony, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.