

**STATEMENT OF RICARDO DA SILVA
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BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**

February 2, 2022

Good morning Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore and other Members of the Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the progress made by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) toward implementing the Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program (VRRAP) and the success of the Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) pilot program. VA recognizes the importance of expanding pathways to jobs through retraining and innovative education programs which aid Veterans seeking to start or grow their careers in high demand occupations and appreciates the work of the Committee to expand such opportunities.

Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC)

On August 16, 2017, Public Law 115-48 (the “Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017”) was signed into law, which at section 116 authorized VA to carry out the five-year VET TEC pilot program. VET TEC provides eligible Veterans with the opportunity to enroll in certain high technology programs of education without charge to their GI Bill entitlement. Through VET TEC training programs, Veterans acquire high-tech skills to assist them in moving quickly into in-demand jobs in the following five areas: information sciences, computer programming, data processing, media application and computer software. VET TEC training programs, at 6 to 28 weeks in length, are typically shorter than traditional college programs, allowing Veterans to complete training and enter the job market more rapidly.

Since launching the VET TEC program on April 1, 2019, VA has granted entitlement to 36,784 eligible Veterans and currently has 983 Veterans enrolled as of January 3, 2022. To date, 3,284 Veterans have graduated, with 1,694 Veterans securing employment and 936 graduates are currently within their 180-day employment window. There are currently 35 VET TEC training providers. On average, graduates are earning an annual salary of \$60,000 and securing employment within 70 days of completing their VET TEC program.

On January 5, 2021, Public Law 116-315 (the “Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020”) was signed into law, which at section 4302 increased VET TEC pilot program annual funding from \$15 million to \$45 million and expanded eligibility for the program to include transitioning Service members who are within 180 days before their separation. The Act also made

part-time training programs eligible and replaced the two-year operational requirement for training programs with a requirement regarding expertise of training provider instructors.

Veteran demand for VET TEC continues to be strong, and VA has exhausted available VET TEC funding on three occasions – May 2020, October 2020, and August 2021. When this occurs, VA can no longer support new enrollments, but students currently participating in a VET TEC program will continue to be supported through completion of their training. Additionally, VA continues to adjudicate Certificate of Eligibility (COE) and training provider applications during these periods. VA expects to exhaust fiscal year (FY) 2022 funding in the spring of 2022. As of January 3, 2022, VA has approximately \$20 million unallocated and available to use for VET TEC in FY 2022.

In October 2020, VA launched the VET TEC Employer Consortium to accelerate hiring opportunities for participants and provide them additional employment resources and tools. The collaboration between training providers, employers and VA within the VET TEC Employer Consortium creates a key space for students to make connections, attend events hosted by VA and employer-partners and be primed for employment success at the completion of their program. The VET TEC Employer Consortium seeks to engage VET TEC participants by hosting events where VA connects participants and those supporting the program, including employer-partners, and other partners committed to Veteran hiring. The Employer Consortium supports VA's commitment to shorten the hiring window from the time of program completion to employment in the field of study.

VA partnered with 19 employer-partners, to include VA's own Office of Information and Technology (OI&T), that seek qualified VET TEC graduates for filling internal information technology vacancies. In addition to VA'S OI&T, employer-partners are Accenture, Amazon, Blackbox, Delaware Resource Group of Oklahoma, Electronic On-Ramp, ERA Solutions, Google, Maximus, MITRE, Oaklea Simpson Security, Pocket Prep, Skillstorm, VetsEZ, Veterans In Parking, Walmart and Windstream. VA also partnered with Hiring Our Heroes and LinkedIn to provide resources that increase VET TEC graduates' success in being hired and provide opportunities for employers to locate them. In VA's partnership with LinkedIn, graduates are able to receive one year of access to LinkedIn Premium. These premium accounts entitle graduates to enhanced career connections and to access LinkedIn's library of online courses. Outside of the Employer Consortium, VET TEC graduates have been hired by a range of companies including General Dynamic Information Technology, JP Morgan Chase, and Microsoft.

Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program (VRRAP)

On March 11, 2021, Public Law 117-2 (the "American Rescue Plan Act of 2021") was signed into law. Section 8006 of this law requires VA to carry out a retraining program which provides up to 12 months of retraining assistance via covered programs of education to not more than 17,250 eligible Veterans who are unemployed due to a

covered public health emergency. Eligible individuals receive a monthly housing allowance for each month a covered program of education is pursued, and retraining assistance is paid directly to institutions in the following increments: 50% at the beginning of the program of education, 25% at the completion of the program and 25% after the Veteran finds employment in a field related to the program of education. VA collaborated with Department of Labor to identify high-demand occupations and successfully implemented the VRRAP program 60 days after enactment.

On June 8, 2021, Public Law 117-16 (the “Training in High-demand Roles to Improve Veteran Employment Act” or the “THRIVE Act”) was signed into law, which made timely improvements to the VRRAP program. The THRIVE Act enabled VA to have more input in determining the high-demand occupations for which VA will provide retraining assistance. The THRIVE Act also required VA to: coordinate with the Department of Labor to notify participating Veterans of the availability of employment placement services; contact Veterans at regular intervals after completing VRRAP to inquire about their experience in the program and their employment status; enter into a memorandum of understanding with qualified nonprofit organizations to facilitate the employment of participating Veterans; and make other improvements.

As of January 10, 2022, there have been 3,380 VRRAP participants. VA has received 13,711 applications for VRRAP benefits, and 9,265 Veterans received a COE. To date, 573 Veterans graduated from programs using VRRAP benefits and 70 have been employed as a result of their participation in VRRAP. A total of 942 training providers have been approved for VRRAP, and VA has allocated \$100.6 million of the \$386 million in total program funding. VRRAP is available until December 11, 2022, or until the funding or participant limit is reached. However, benefit payments may continue to be paid after that date for individuals already pursuing a program under VRRAP.

VA employed several outreach tools to encourage participation in VRRAP. The specific dissemination tools include GovDelivery messaging, a GI Bill Student Newsletter, the Know Newsletter for School Certifying Officials, a THRIVE Act Fact Sheet, social media and other communication channels. VA continues to conduct analyses of the program to identify gaps and increase program awareness. VA recently analyzed VRRAP data of approved schools, approved applicants and enrollees from May through September 2021, to determine if there were trends or gaps based on locations at the state/district level. VA found no clear correlation between location and the percentage of approved applicants or the percentage of enrollees.

VA recognizes that VRRAP is being underutilized by those who applied for and received a COE. VA is working on fielding a survey to understand why over 5,000 Veterans who originally sought a COE for the program have not enrolled in a program of education. VA is also planning additional targeted outreach to increase interest and school enrollment.

Although there are 942 facilities approved for VRRAP training, very few of those participating facilities are public institutions. Based on feedback VA received from a

number of institutions and State Approving Agencies, the payment terms associated with VRRAP, as outlined in the statute, are not conducive to the participation of public facilities, especially for degree programs, as those facilities are not able to easily adjust their accounting modality. These payment terms have caused VRRAP to disproportionately attract private, for-profit, and non-degree facilities.

Conclusion

VA understands Congress' goal of providing unemployed Veterans with educational benefits to pursue retraining opportunities in high-demand occupations and appreciates the Committee's attention on increasing Veteran employment. Mr. Chairman, VA will continue to strengthen its initiatives to achieve this goal. This concludes my testimony, and I welcome any questions that you or other Members of the Subcommittee may have.