

Testimony of Mike Hazard

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Before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity

Good afternoon, Chairman Van Orden and Members of the Committee. My name is Mike Hazard, and I am employed by the United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipe Fitting Industry of the United States and Canada (“UA”) as the Program Manager of the UA’s Veterans in Piping Training Program (“VIP Program”). I want to thank the Committee for giving me the opportunity today to share the success we’ve had at the UA VIP Program in helping transitioning service men and women prepare for a career in the plumbing and pipefitting industries, and to offer the UA’s views on several bills currently being considered by this Committee.

First, I would like to briefly share some information about my background and the important work we do at the UA VIP Program. I first joined the UA as a pipe tradesman in Santa Barbara, California in 1987. Soon after that, however, I placed my UA career on hold and joined the United States Navy, where I proudly served as an Aviation Rescue Swimmer and H-46 Helicopter Mechanic for 11 years.

I was honorably discharged from the Navy in 1999 while holding the rank of Petty Officer First Class.

Following my discharge from the Navy, I was able to pick up where I had left off at the UA and returned to work as a journeyman pipefitter. After working in the field for several years, I was offered and accepted a position as a Training Coordinator for a regional apprenticeship program in Southern California, where I facilitated plumbing and pipe fitting training for over 10,000 UA members. I was promoted to Executive Director of this training fund in 2008, which is the position I held until I accepted my current position at the UA in 2012.

In my current position, I manage the day-to-day operations of the nine UA VIP training sites located on seven military bases across the United States. Under the VIP program, the UA offers departing service men and women from all branches of the military the opportunity to participate in an intensive, eighteen-week training program on base which they receive at no cost to either the government or the student. The VIP Program offers courses in Fire Suppression, Pipe Fitting/Welding, and Heating, Ventilation, Air Conditioning and Refrigeration (HVAC-R). When training is successfully completed, the graduates are guaranteed a job and are placed in one of the UA's best-in-class, "gold standard" apprenticeship programs with advanced credit towards the completion of their apprenticeship. Since its inception,

I am proud to state that the UA VIP Program has provided apprenticeship opportunities to over 3,170 military veterans.

Data prepared by the Department of Labor shows that the average annual compensation received by the graduate of a registered apprenticeship program, included the UA training programs affiliated with the VIP Program, is significantly higher than the average annual earnings of an individual holding a Bachelor's or Associate's degree. The DOL also reports that 90% of individuals who complete a registered apprenticeship program retain their employment. These findings allow me to confidently say that the UA VIP Program is designed to place departing servicemembers on a path to a successful and sustainable career.

I know from my own personal experience how valuable it can be when transitioning back to civilian life to feel that an organization like the UA has your back. Reconnecting with my UA brothers and sisters and taking advantage of the work opportunities in this thriving industry certainly made the transition more manageable for me. It has therefore been deeply meaningful for me in my current position to be able to provide a similar experience to other veterans by connecting departing servicemembers with both the training opportunities and support systems provided by the UA VIP Program.

With this background behind me, I will now summarize the UA's views regarding several bills currently being considered by this Committee. First, the UA

would like to express its strong support for several pending bills mentioned in the hearing invitation I received. These include H.R. 3601, the Student Veteran Work Modernization Act, H.R. 5190, the Military Family Protection from Debt Act, the draft bill proposing to modify the requirements of the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship, and the draft bill proposing to waive certain fees that are charged in connection with housing loans guaranteed by the Secretary of Veterans' Affairs.

Two of these bills—H.R. 3601 and the draft bill regarding the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship—will expand educational opportunities for departing servicemembers by expanding veteran eligibility for these important benefits. The other two bills I mentioned will help provide financial security to veterans and military families by waiving certain fees charged by the Department of Veteran Affairs in connection with housing loan guarantees provided by that agency, and by extending debt protections currently enjoyed by servicemembers and their spouses to other dependents of the servicemembers. These are measured, common-sense reforms that will provide tangible benefits to veterans and military families and which we believe can receive broad, bipartisan support.

On the other hand, I would also like to take this opportunity to express the UA's opposition to the draft bill titled "Consolidating Veteran Employment Services for Improved Performance Act of 2023." Broadly speaking, this bill would transfer the work performed by the VETs office at the Department of Labor to the

Department of Veterans' Affairs. While I am sure this bill is well-intentioned, I believe that it is misguided and would not advance the interests of transitioning service members. The VA has a very important mission, but—unlike the DOL—job creation isn't typically understood as being a significant part of that mission. I therefore believe that the DOL is and should continue to be an important partner for the VA in providing training and employment opportunities to veterans.

I personally have been working with the DOL VETs office for 15 years, and during that time, I have consistently been impressed by the workforce development experts that are working there. These are individuals who take the time to actually go out and talk to veterans to learn more about their experiences and challenges. It has been my experience that, owing to the efforts of the VETs office, there is good cross-agency communication between the DOL, the VA, and the Department of Defense, and that the separate programs administered by these agencies are not unnecessarily siloed off. It is also my experience that the DOL VETs office plays an important role in connecting veterans with the apprenticeship programs that are also registered with the DOL. Therefore, I believe that changing the structure of the DOL VETs office in the manner proposed could result in much more harm than good, and I would therefore ask the Committee not to move forward on that particular effort.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the Committee again for this opportunity, and I am prepared to answer any questions the Members of the Committee may have for me.