

STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

WITH RESPECT TO

Pending Legislation

WASHINGTON, D.C.

October 18, 2023

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, 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.

H.R. 522, Deliver for Veterans Act

The VFW supports this proposal to pay the total expense price for purchasing and shipping a vehicle or other conveyance adapted for operation by disabled individuals who are eligible to receive such benefits. With the recent passage of the *Advancing Uniform Transportation Opportunities (AUTO) for Veterans Act*, the ability for veterans in need of adaptive services to have uninterrupted independence through safe driving without paying astronomical amounts is now possible. However, there is more work to be done for veterans in remote areas such as Guam. In recent years, the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) responded to some of the needs that veterans in Guam were experiencing by standing up a local new amputee clinic that provides prosthetic care. The *Deliver for Veterans Act* would continue this work by amending the existing law to include a provision that would eliminate the undue financial burden, which is estimated to be thousands of dollars, for veterans not located in the vicinity where vehicles can be manufactured without a shipping requirement. The United States did not hesitate to pay the total expenses when purchasing or shipping the vehicles that these veterans needed to operate in battle, and we should not hesitate to pay the same expenses for remotely located veterans to receive the vehicles that are needed for them to operate independently after service.

H.R. 2830, Veteran Improvement Commercial Driver License Act of 2023

The VFW supports this proposal to revise the rules for approval by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs of commercial driver license (CDL) education programs. Our country faces supply chain

issues and one of the reasons is a lack of commercial transport drivers. Many CDL programs are offered at for-profit institutions that require different approval requirements for new locations and are identified as “branches.” Not-for-profit schools are allowed to open new campuses and receive approval to utilize VA education benefits as soon as a new location opens. For-profit schools that open new branches have different approval requirements, one of which is a wait time of up to two years for students to utilize VA benefits. These same student veterans are able to immediately use these benefits for the same program at the main institution.

H.R. 3601, Student Veteran Work Study Modernization Act

The VFW supports this proposal, which would allow students using VA education benefits at a rate of at least half-time basis to receive allowances for participating in work-study programs. This proposal represents a need brought to the forefront by one of our own VFW-SVA legislative fellows earlier this year. Many student veterans are only able to attend at a half-time rate as they pursue a degree along with managing other responsibilities. They may also benefit from VA work-study opportunities and have a desire to give back to the veteran community through work associated with VA.

H.R. 3722, Daniel J. Harvey, Jr. and Adam Lambert Improving Servicemember Transition to Reduce Veteran Suicide Act and the Amendment in the Nature of a Substitute to it

Service member and veteran suicide prevention continues to be a top priority for the VFW. Recent research indicates that suicide risk increases after transition from the military. Additional research shows that risk is also heightened in individuals with mental health diagnoses. Accordingly, it is appropriate to educate and support transitioning service members with connections and resources to ensure risk factors are identified and care is given. The VFW supports this legislation that would create a five-year pilot program to educate transitioning service members on reintegrating into civilian life and factors related to suicide risk. This pilot program would also facilitate a warm handoff to VA, which would include an initial appointment, a health assessment, and a tailored treatment plan that addresses medical conditions associated with heightened suicide risk.

We do recommend that Congress ensures the provisions of this legislation occur in a private setting. This would enable transitioning service members to more thoroughly understand the conditions associated with heightened suicide risk, as they may not have pre-existing diagnoses. This type of setting would also ensure a safe, confidential environment to discuss personal, service-related events that could lead to the conditions outlined in this subsection. Furthermore, the VFW also suggests that the Department of Defense ensures appropriate processes and resources are in place to accommodate medical record requests and submissions to VA.

H.R. 3738, To amend title 38, United States Code, to establish in the Department of Veterans Affairs the Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration, and for other purposes

The VFW supports this proposal to 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), Veterans Health Administration, and Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). VBA oversees 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 creates 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 that central point of contact for Veterans Service Organizations and Congress. This would ensure that the GI Bill, Veteran Readiness and Employment, home loan, and other benefits centered on economic opportunity receive the attention they deserve.

H.R. 3816, Veterans’ Entry to Apprenticeship Act

The VFW supports this proposal to ensure that veterans may attend pre-apprenticeship programs using certain educational assistance provided by VA. Quality pre-apprenticeship programs can play a valuable role in providing work-based learning to help individuals prepare for an entry-level Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP). While pre-apprenticeship programs have varied designs and approaches, the Department of Labor has outlined the elements that can place an individual on the potential career pathway to employability through a RAP. There has been a sixty-four percent growth in new apprentices in the past ten years and a ninety percent retention rate of apprentices by their employers after completing an apprenticeship. Providing pre-apprenticeship usage for VA benefits would allow veterans to obtain the skills they need to succeed while earning the wages they need to build financial security.

H.R. 5190, Military Family Protection from Debt Act

The VFW supports this legislation to expand certain protections to dependents of members of the armed forces. Financial stressors can inhibit a service members’ ability to effectively focus on the mission while serving. Financial stressors affecting their families can also contribute to unnecessary distractions. This proposal would expand protections for dependents of service members so financial difficulties do not negatively affect service members while they are performing their duties.

H.R. XXXX, Expanding Access for Online Veteran Students Act

The VFW supports this proposal to expand the monthly housing stipend for student veterans who

take summer courses online to receive the national monthly amount. Currently, the monthly housing allowance rates for online courses are half of the national average, which is simply not enough for many student veterans. If they take courses during the summer, even online, they should not experience a decrease in their housing benefit that could cause them financial hardship before they have completed a degree program.

While this is a step in the right direction, the VFW would like for student veterans to receive at least the full national average rate for housing allowance even if they are enrolled in a degree program that is conducted online for some or all semesters. Online education has adapted and grown since the COVID-19 pandemic, much like working from home has changed the work model around the country. Student veterans continue to require housing assistance in order to successfully pursue higher education, even when enrolled in online programs.

H.R. XXXX, To amend title 38, United States Code, to improve the processes to approve programs of education for purposes of the educational assistance programs of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes

The VFW supports this proposal to modify the requirement for schools to provide personalized information about costs and financial assistance. The new language “to the maximum extent practicable” would give schools more flexibility without holding them back from receiving VA education funding. The legislation would also create a single VA website for school certifying officials to find current training. This would ensure that up-to-date training is always available even if schools experience staff turnover, or updates sent through email have been lost.

These are both legislative priorities for the VFW as schools have communicated that these changes would help facilitate their efforts to support their student veterans. We suggest adding to Section 1(a) that all policy and guidance updates be included on the VA website for school officials, and that VA be required to update that information in a timely manner as delays in keeping this information current could cause problems.

H.R. XXXX, Consolidating Veteran Employment Services for Improved Performance Act of 2023

Although the VFW understands the goals of this legislation, our organization cannot support moving Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS) from the Department of Labor to the Department of Veterans Affairs at this time. When the committee first introduced this concept more than a decade ago, VETS was in turmoil. However, since the *VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011* (P.L. 112-56), VETS has evolved. Today, VETS successfully leverages business across the Department of Labor to execute its mission, to include the Employment and Training Administration, Office of Federal Contract Compliance, and Office of Disability Employment Policy, among others. Though this legislation seeks to maintain these relationships, the VFW keenly understands that substantive interagency collaboration can be a challenge. Moreover, this proposal would likely present substantial challenges to state workforce agencies that would now report programs to separate entities under the purview of separate federal agencies with separate missions. Should Congress successfully compel VA to establish its fourth administration, the VFW may revisit this concept once this administration is viable and highly functioning.

H.R. XXXX, To amend title 38, United States Code, to modify the requirements of the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship

The VFW supports amending the specific credit hours language for the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship, and including the ability to utilize this benefit for graduate degrees in STEM fields. The VFW supported the extension of entitlements for STEM students in the Forever GI Bill because of the importance of these degrees. If there are specific requirements that are a barrier for students to utilize this extension, then they should be removed. Education for veterans is a top priority for the VFW, and we especially want to see veterans succeed in high-demand fields.

H.R. XXXX, To amend title 38, United States Code, to waive the fee for a housing loan guaranteed by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs for a veteran with a service-connected disability who applied for such loan before receiving a disability rating from the Secretary

The VFW supports this proposal that would specifically benefit active duty service members who utilize the VA Home Loan Guarantee program prior to receiving a disability rating from VA. Current housing market volatility and uncertainty can create an environment for service members where they cannot wait until VA finishes processing their disability claims before capitalizing on the opportunity to purchase a home. Some service members may opt to finalize purchasing a home when the right opportunity arises rather than waiting months to receive a VA disability rating.

This proposal would ensure that service members who have conducted a pre-discharge examination can still receive the funding fee back from VA if they receive a ratings decision after finalizing the purchase of a home. We support the intent of this change but believe the language should be changed to “effective date” instead of date of examination. This would ensure that service members retain the earliest effective date for eligibility. The process for examinations happens after a notice of intent is filed, so changing this language to effective date would provide service members with an earlier timeframe.

The VFW would like to ensure that if this proposal becomes law, veterans have the flexibility to choose what is in their best financial interest. We would hope the options to pay down the principle of the mortgage or to receive the reimbursement from VA would both be available.

H.R. XXXX, Transparency for Student Veterans Act of 2023

The VFW supports the intent of this draft proposal to require VA to report on outcomes of student veterans who have used education benefits. However, we would like clarification that providing data would not overly burden the schools. Additionally, the memorandum of understanding with the Department of Education should be mandatory and established before this reporting is required by VA. This measure would ensure appropriate coordination of efforts. Currently, VA cannot track accurate graduation rates of student veterans. This can only be accomplished by requiring the Department of Education to identify and track student veteran progress and completion in post-secondary education. This memorandum of understanding partnership would be key to these metrics reporting efforts.

Chairman Van Orden, this concludes my testimony. Again, the VFW thanks you and Ranking Member Levin for the opportunity to testify on these important issues before this subcommittee. I am prepared to take 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 2023, 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.