

**STATEMENT OF
DR. JOSEPH W. WESCOTT
NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE LIAISON
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE APPROVING AGENCIES
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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Introduction

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin and members of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, I am pleased to appear before you today on behalf of the fifty-two-member State agencies of the National Association of State Approving Agencies (NASAA). I appreciate the opportunity to provide comments to this committee on legislation pertaining to veterans' education and training and the GI Bill®. I am accompanied today by NASAA President Frank Myers and Vice President Rebecca Ryan.

Role of the State Approving Agencies: Past and Present

State Approving Agencies (SAAs) play a critical role in the administration of GI Bill benefits. Shortly after passage of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, or the GI Bill of Rights, Congress, recognizing it was the responsibility of the states within our federal system of government to oversee the education of its citizens, required that each state establish a "State Approving Agency." In response, the governor of each state designated a state bureau or department as the SAA. The SAA was to be supported through reimbursement of its expenses by the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Thus evolved a truly cooperative federal-state partnership that maintains the rights of the states while monitoring and protecting a federally sponsored program administered under the terms and conditions of federal law.

The original GI Bill, as enacted in 1944, relied on state agencies to establish standards for and to approve programs of education in which eligible individuals could use GI Bill benefits. Over time SAAs have evolved to become the primary means of assuring institutional accountability. Federal law is clear in that SAAs are the primary governmental body through which approval of education and training for Veterans' educational benefits is to occur. With specialized authorization under the Code of Federal Regulations and state statutes, they exercise the state's authority to approve, disapprove and monitor education and training programs. The SAA brings to this mission knowledge of state law and regulations as well as knowledge of the local environment and needs of the state. SAAs also assist the states and VA with exposing fraudulent and criminal activity involving the payment of Veteran's benefits.

In 1948, SAA representatives met to form a professional organization to promote high professional standards, create a forum for the exchange of best practices, and to promote uniformity of purpose and practice. For more than seventy-five years now, NASAA has worked with our VA partners, the VSOs, and all agencies to ensure the greatest numbers of quality programs are available to those eligible for education and training benefits. We do this through our primary mission of program approval and our related efforts: compliance, oversight, training, liaison, and outreach. Indeed, with the exception of federal facilities, the State Approving Agencies are the sole authority responsible for the approval of all programs of education and training within the nation. We take that responsibility seriously and consider ourselves the “gatekeepers of quality” for programs approved under the GI Bill.

Today, fifty-two SAAs in 50 states, as well as the District of Columbia and the territory of Puerto Rico (one state has two SAAs), composed of approximately 215 professional and support personnel, are supervising over 13,000 active facilities and nearly 220,000 programs. The Subcommittee is no stranger to our fundamental role as it is the same today as when we were created by Congress. SAAs work in collaboration with the VA and our other partners to promote and safeguard quality education and training programs for Veterans and other eligible persons *and* assist the VA in preventing fraud, waste, and abuse in the administration of the GI Bill. NASAA believes the primary responsibility and focus of the SAAs is, and should continue to be, to review, evaluate, and approve programs at schools and training facilities, utilizing state and federal criteria. It is this mission that underlies our comments today and upon which we base our concerns and suggestion.

H.R. 2830 - “Veteran Improvement Commercial Driver License Act of 2023”

This legislation, while well meaning, causes NASAA great concern in its present form. As drafted, this bill sweeps away the protections provided for veterans under the two-year rule for private and not-for-profit educational institutions that do not offer a standard college degree (NCD institution). These educational institutions must be in existence for at least two years and approved by other necessary state regulatory authorities, such as a state department of education or state department of business licensure. The institution must also have successfully offered the program for approval for that same period of time. This provision in essence, ensures that these institutions are committed to their mission long term, and have demonstrated success both programmatically and professionally. This is an important safeguard preventing an NCD institution, such as a truck driving school, from gaining approval without demonstrating a measure of quality and stability in its continuous operation.

This bill, as presently drafted, only requires that an institution offer the same curriculum as a previously SAA approved institution anywhere in the nation. This, and having met the requirements for licensure within the state, are the only requirements for an exemption from the two-year rule. A truck driving school could request immediate approval of a “branch” campus anywhere in the nation, and the SAA of jurisdiction would have no records (graduation rate, CDL pass rate, or job placement) to determine the approvability of the program. SAAs view their role as the gatekeepers of quality, and the defenders of the integrity of the GI Bill. When

we review a program for approval, particularly at a new location, curriculum is only one factor we review. We ensure that only programs that demonstrate quality educational outcomes for students are accepted, and do so through the review of instructor qualifications, administration, equipment, classrooms, and technical ability to administer the program. These factors can vary widely from one location to another (particularly from one state to another) and it is important, to determine program success, that we have some record of success to review and evaluate.

NASAA respectfully suggests that this legislation be amended so that the only institutions which may apply for any waiver from the requirements of the two-year rule are those within the same state as the initial campus upon which the institution bases its application to the SAA of jurisdiction. This means that one location must be approved in the state under the two-year rule before any branch campuses can be approved under any type of waiver. Also, we strongly suggest that the legislation provides that institutions must show a history of having provided the program at that location for a set period of time, 6 months to 1 year, or a set number of classes with at least 80% of graduates obtaining CDL licensure within one month of graduation.

NASAA opposes this bill in its present form.

H.R. _____ - “Transparency for Student Veterans Act of 2023”.

This bill amends 3698 Comprehensive policy on providing information to veterans such that the information provided now includes median amount of debt from Title IV programs of education leading to a certificate or professional licensure at an approved Institution of Higher Learning. Likewise, the information provided to veterans and members of the Armed Forces will now include the rates at which veterans and active-duty members enroll after the first year (continuation rate) and the rates at which the graduate (completion rate) from both degree and certificate programs. The bill requires that veterans and service members also be provided the average annual salary for those who complete the approved program.

NASAA agrees that providing this data to prospective student veterans and service members allows them to make more informed choices about which school would be the best fit for them as well as ensuring they have better opportunities to complete their educational goals.

NASAA supports this bill.

H.R. 3816 - “Veterans’ Entry to Apprenticeship Act”

This bill provides that Pre-Apprenticeship programs may be approved for GI Bill benefits and allows veterans to enroll in these programs as set forward with the requirements prescribed within the bill. While NASAA agrees with the purpose of this bill, we suggest that safeguards be added to protect veterans enrolled in these programs. First, we propose that only those pre-apprenticeship programs which are vocational in nature be considered for approval. In 2012, the

US Department of Labor issued Training and Employment Notice 12-12, which outlines the definition of a quality Pre-Apprenticeship Program. NASAA believes that approval of any program for GI Bill benefits should meet these same standards as a metric of demonstrating quality training is occurring within the program. Likewise, we would like to see a requirement that these programs, to be approved, not only be required to demonstrate that the program will provide an individual with the skills and competencies needed to enroll in an apprenticeship program, but that they also demonstrate a record of success in placing veterans into a registered apprenticeship program at an acceptable rate for the industry involved (at least 80%) within six months of completion of the pre-apprenticeship program. Finally, pre apprenticeship graduates who move onto a full apprenticeship program must be granted prior credit and advanced standing by the apprenticeship program.

NASAA supports this bill with suggested amendments.

H.R. 5914 - 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.

This bill addresses the need for veterans to seamlessly access their hard-earned education benefits to facilitate a successful transition to civilian life. Sadly, some recent legislative mandates, particularly those requiring all educational institutions to provide individualized shopping sheets, while intended to provide transparency, have instead become, in some instances, an administrative burden preventing veterans from accessing their education benefits. Additionally, varying interpretations of rules and inconsistent guidance has caused a communication gap between Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) and School Certifying Officials (SCOs).

This legislation amends the requirement for a shopping sheet to state that SAAs will only disapprove programs when facilities fail to provide certain forms “to the maximum extent possible.” Also, this legislation requires a centralized communication platform for improved communication between VA and SCOs. NASAA believes this new language will address those issues by providing flexibility to institutions, such as police academies, truck driving schools and other approved NCD institutions, while still providing adequate safeguards for veterans and their families.

NASAA supports this bill.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, today, fifty-two SAAs, composed of approximately 215 professional and support personnel are supervising over 13,000 active facilities with almost 220,000 programs. We are extremely grateful for the opportunity to once again appear before this committee to share our

positions on the important legislation before the Committee. We remain committed to working closely with our VA partners, VSO stakeholders and educational institutions on these and other initiatives designed to protect the quality and the integrity of the various GI Bill® programs and the Veterans and family members who have sacrificed so much for this great Nation. I thank you again for this opportunity and I look forward to answering any questions that you or committee members may have.