

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.

March 20, 2024

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. 6225, Expanding Home Loans for Guard and Reservists Act

The VFW supports this legislation, which would expand eligibility for the VA Home Loan Guaranty program to service members of the National Guard and Reserves who have performed active duty for training for thirty consecutive days or more. Currently, only full-time National Guard service for ninety cumulative days, which includes thirty consecutive days, qualifies for the home loan. The VFW supports this expansion to ensure that members of the National Guard and Reserves have the housing stability needed to effectively perform their duties as they balance military service and civilian lives.

H.R. 6656, Stuck on Hold Act

The VFW supports this legislation to require the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to improve each of its customer service telephone lines by implementing an automated system to inform callers of the anticipated wait time, and to automatically generate a return call to anyone waiting longer than fifteen minutes. It would also require VA to issue guidance on how to reduce overall caller wait times to fifteen minutes or less. The VFW recognizes the importance of this proposed improvement to VA telephone lines to better serve callers and ensure they connect with a VA professional to address their needs.

H.R. 7323, To amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to disapprove courses of education offered by a public institution of higher learning that does not charge the in-State tuition rate to a veteran using certain educational assistance under title 10 of such Code.

The VFW supports this legislation to include the Montgomery GI Bill Selected Reserve benefit to the in-state tuition waiver within title 38 of the United States Code. Currently, VA can disapprove programs and courses offered by institutions of higher learning that do not offer veterans in-state tuition rates. Chapter 30, 31, 33, and 35 benefits are included in the law presently. This legislation would add Chapter 1606 of title 10, the Montgomery GI Bill Selected Reserve. The Selected Reserve is a key component of the Reserve forces. These service members train regularly and can be called to active duty at any time. Their education benefits should be equally protected as compared to other VA programs, and they should be fairly charged in-state tuition rates.

H.R. 7613, Veterans Flight Training Responsibility Act of 2024

The VFW supports this proposal to set limitations on the use of the GI Bill for certain flight training. Years ago, the GI Bill was essentially a blank check to allow certain flight schools to charge uncapped amounts of money. Flight training is expensive, and currently pilots are in demand across the country. However, the VFW believes there should be reasonable limitations on the amount of money spent on flight training, and that this legislation is a fair balance for veterans who pursue flight training through the GI Bill.

H.R. 7643, Veterans Congressional Work Study Act

The VFW supports this proposal to expand the VA work-study program to include work focused on VA-related casework, policy, or oversight in a House or Senate committee, the Congressional Research Service, the Government Accountability Office, or the Congressional Budget Office. The program focuses on work entirely related to VA and veterans, and currently allows for work in VA medical facilities, offices, cemeteries, and the Board of Veterans' Appeals. The proposed expansion would be consistent with VA's focus, while providing meaningful work opportunities for student veterans in additional career fields.

H.R. 7653, Veterans Employment Readiness Yield (VERY) Act of 2024

The VFW supports this proposal to update terminology in United States Code regarding the Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) program. Currently, veterans may be eligible for this benefit if they experience an "employment handicap" due to their service-connected disabilities. This proposal would change the language to "employment barrier." The VFW supports modernizing this terminology to more accurately reflect the effects that service-connected disabilities can have on veterans and their employment.

Discussion Draft, To amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for the restoration of entitlement of individuals entitled to educational assistance under the laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs who use such entitlement to pursue a course or program of education at an educational institution found to have violated certain prohibitions on advertising, sales, and enrollment practices, and for other purposes

The VFW supports this proposal to ensure that veterans and beneficiaries of VA education benefits are protected if an educational institution is found to have violated certain prohibitions regarding advertising, sales, and enrollment practices. Schools found in violation would be required to repay funds to the Department of Veterans Affairs. VA would also restore entitlements to beneficiaries. Requiring schools to be responsible for repayment if they engage in unauthorized activities would ensure that taxpayer-supported federal funding is managed properly.

The VFW also supports H.R. 1767, which would provide similar relief to veterans as this proposal. We hope the subcommittee works to combine these two bills to retain the best aspects of both to provide full restitution for veterans who need their education entitlements restored.

Discussion Draft, Enhancing Service Member Transition

The VFW supports the intent of this bill, but has some concerns regarding the details of certain title 10, Department of Defense (DOD), portions of this proposal. The VFW works with approximately ten percent of the separating force every single year, and has direct knowledge of how TAP works and how it *should* work.

This bill contains many great elements such as language from the *TAP Promotion Act* and the *Combat Veterans Pre-Enrollment Act*, both of which the VFW strongly supports. This draft bill also includes reports that would ensure regular updates on critical aspects of transition such as timeliness, attendance, pathway participation, and frequency of participation. The VFW has spoken about the elements in this proposed legislation during numerous hearings before this subcommittee and before the Senate.

However, we have concerns about some of the changes to the title 10 aspects of the bill that we know are well-intentioned, but may have unintended consequences or are not clear enough. For example, we think prohibiting a member of the armed forces from providing pre-separation counseling is a good aspect, but believe prohibiting civilian employees of the Department from doing so may force DOD toward outside contractors, which would further distance counselors from congressional oversight.

Addressing homelessness and food insecurity is a great addition to pre-separation counseling, but pre-separation counseling should happen 365 days prior to separation. We believe adding this screening and a subsequent one closer to separation would provide a more accurate assessment of those needs upon separation. A service member may not be facing homelessness one year from separation, and conducting screening only at that moment may not give an accurate assessment.

We believe the prohibition of providing a DD Form 214 to service members who do not complete counseling is a well-intentioned attempt to force compliance. However, we have knowledge that most junior enlisted service members who do not complete the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) do not do so because they are limited by commanders. This could potentially penalize troops for command failures. We strongly believe there needs to be accountability for DOD to follow the law. Commanders should be held responsible for ensuring their transitioning service members attend TAP in a timely manner. We do not believe withholding a DD Form 214 would accomplish that goal.

The VFW believes the private sector should be used to help improve outcomes in TAP. The portion of this proposal that would incorporate that into the program is potentially beneficial, but it may be too restrictive. We believe the scope of the requirements for partnerships with the private sector should be refined. Currently, there are not many organizations that provide career services to at least 5,000 individuals. There are not enough organizations with a national presence that meet this criteria and could offer services to the entire separating force. Many organizations provide outstanding services to separating service members, but operate at a slightly lesser scale than what is proposed. We believe a pilot program with multiple mid-sized organizations at various locations would be a good start to integrating the private sector into TAP.

The waiver for Reserve Component members is a reasonable provision for those who do not need the assistance, but lack of standardization of resources is a major concern. Simply adding an attendance waiver for certain Reserve Component troops without also adding standardized resources addresses only half of the problem. The VFW believes this is a great start to a transition reform bill, but the issues listed above would need to be addressed before we fully support this language. We hope this subcommittee engages with us to help refine this proposal to ensure it provides the great resources it intends.

Draft Discussion, Fair Access to Co-ops for Veterans Act of 2024

The VFW supports this draft proposal to extend the VA Home Loan Guaranty program to veterans seeking to purchase residential cooperative housing units (co-ops). Since the program does not currently include co-ops, veterans who live in cities where these housing options are prevalent are disproportionately affected. New York City is the prime example. In that city alone, co-ops comprise almost two-thirds of all multi-family housing, for which veterans cannot use VA home loans. Veteran home ownership in New York City is significantly lower than the rest of the country, which is concerning. Other cities where co-ops are prevalent are Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, Minneapolis, Newark, Palm Beach, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. Expanding the VA home loan program to co-ops would help fix an equity issue for veterans who live in these areas, and provide long-term housing stability.

Chairman Van Orden, this concludes my testimony. Again, the VFW thanks you and Ranking Member Levin for the opportunity to testify on legislation pending 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 2024, 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.