

STATEMENT OF
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VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES

FOR THE RECORD

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

WITH RESPECT TO

Pending Legislation

WASHINGTON, D.C.

June 12, 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. 226, Veterans Collaboration Act

The VFW supports the intent of this legislation to establish a pilot program that encourages greater collaboration between the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and nonprofit organizations and institutions of higher education. This would promote VA partnerships with Veterans Service Organizations that provide claims assistance. It would also encourage partnerships with educational institutions that provide pro bono legal services to veterans.

Our one suggested language modification to this legislation is to specify that partnerships with Veterans Service Organizations include *free* assistance by VA-accredited representatives. The VFW strongly supports greater outreach to veterans to access their earned benefits and believes no veteran should have to pay a fee for those services. This is an important clarification to include in the bill text.

H.R. 7543, Guard and Reserve GI Bill Parity Act of 2024

The VFW strongly supports this legislation to create equity in VA education benefits for Reserve Component service members. National Guard and Reserve members train alongside active duty service members and consistently make sacrifices without always earning the same VA education benefits. This bill would allow any day in uniform receiving military pay to count toward Post-9/11 GI Bill eligibility. For years, the sacrifices of Guard and Reserve service

members have been overlooked in achieving GI Bill eligibility. The time is now for parity with all the armed forces in earning VA education benefits.

H.R. 7920, Agriculture Grants for Veterans Education and Training Services Act

The VFW supports this legislation to create a program within the Department of Agriculture to award competitive grants to entities that provide farming and ranching opportunities to veterans. While a traditional four-year degree program might not be desirable for every veteran after service, we support training and education opportunities for all types of employment. Farming and ranching work can provide satisfying, stable work that contributes to the community in a positive way.

Discussion Draft, To amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for an annual increase in stipend for books, supplies, equipment, and other educational costs under Post-9/11 Educational Assistance Program of Department of Veterans Affairs

The VFW supports this legislation to increase the annual stipend for books, supplies, and equipment under the Post-9/11 GI Bill from \$1,000 to \$1,400. While the cost of books and printed materials has increased significantly over the last decade, and even more so due to recent levels of inflation, VA's book stipend for students has remained stagnant. This benefit is a critical component to a veteran's education and should be increased regularly to meet rising costs.

Discussion Draft, To amend title 38, United States Code, to increase the amount of educational assistance paid by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to an eligible individual during the first year of a full-time program of apprenticeship or other on-job training

The VFW supports this legislation to increase the housing allowance during the second six-month period of an apprenticeship or on-the-job training program for which a veteran is using VA education benefits. The increase from 80 percent to 90 percent would help veterans complete these important education programs that provide direct job training while ensuring their basic housing needs are covered. The VFW would also like to see more data reported on the success of these programs, as well as information to better understand the needs of the veterans who decide to drop out before completion.

Discussion Draft, End Veteran Homelessness Act of 2024

The VFW supports this proposal to modify the Department of Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program. HUD-VASH combines HUD's Housing Choice Voucher rental assistance with VA case management and supportive services. This proposal would expand case management for homeless veterans to provide assistance with rental costs and administrative fees such as security deposits. The bill would also establish an annual report on the HUD-VASH program including usage data, staffing ratios, services provided to veterans, and barriers that prevented voucher use. Lastly, the proposal includes a Government Accountability Office report on characteristics of homeless veterans served by the HUD-VASH

program. These reports would provide important information on the success of the program and would assist in identifying where specific improvements should be made.

Draft Discussion, Student Veteran Debt Relief Act of 2024

The VFW supports this legislation to address student debt due to overpayment of VA education benefits. If VA overpays a student or school, the student should not be negatively impacted. VA should make every effort to recoup the funds while ensuring that the student, if liable, is offered a payment plan to repay the debt over time. Errors made by VA should not prevent student veterans from completing their education courses in a timely manner. Financial stability is critical while they are studying or training to maximize the potential of their education leading to stable employment and successful outcomes after graduation.

Draft Discussion, VA Housing Loan Forever Act of 2023

The VFW membership is currently reviewing this proposal. If a VFW resolution reaches our national convention this July, we will have more feedback to inform our position on this proposal.

Draft Discussion, Modernizing the Veterans On-Campus Experience Act of 2024

The VFW supports the intent of this proposed legislation that specifies the requirement of a bachelor's degree for VA on-campus counselors. It would also create a limit for counselors to provide services to no more than twenty-five students at a time.

The VFW is concerned about shortages of both VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) counselors and Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) counselors on college campuses across the country. Since taking on Chapter 31 casework, we have heard that VSOC staff are experiencing burnout and have limited time to carry out their VSOC-focused work. We have also heard that VSOC counselors often work with forty or more students at a time, so capping the number of veterans they serve may not be feasible or helpful. We agree that lowering the education requirement from a master's degree to a bachelor's degree could help increase the amount of applicants for these important jobs. We would argue that keeping this requirement flexible could also increase the demand for these positions as well as the potential to retain the right staff who would not be easily tempted to leave for other types of work.

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.