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**STATEMENT OF
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SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
JUNE 12, 2024**

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin and Members of the Subcommittee:

DAV (Disabled American Veterans) has a mission that includes the principle that this nation's first duty to veterans is the rehabilitation and welfare of its wartime disabled. This principle envisions vocational rehabilitation and/or education to assist these veterans to prepare for and obtain gainful employment, enhanced opportunities for employment, job placement and self-employment, so that the full array of talents and abilities of disabled veterans are used productively and to their greatest levels.

We are pleased to provide our views on the bills impacting service-disabled veterans, their families and the programs administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that are under consideration by the Subcommittee.

H.R. 226, the Veterans Collaboration Act

The Veterans Collaboration Act would mandate VA to initiate a two-year pilot program aimed at fostering cooperation between the VA, nonprofit organizations, and institutions of higher learning to provide administrative support to veterans.

The program would focus on collaborating with veterans service organizations (VSO) and educational institutions offering pro bono legal aid to veterans for filing disability compensation claims. Additionally, it would require the Department to establish metrics to identify and promote the most effective service providers, target states with large veteran populations, and utilize social media for promotion and outreach.

The Secretary would also be required to submit quarterly reports on the program's progress and its impact on veterans to the relevant congressional committees. DAV has no resolution from our membership on this matter, and therefore takes no position on this bill.

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

GI Bill education benefits date back to 1944; serving as a critical tool in helping service members transition back into civilian life and closing the opportunity gap created by military service with their civilian counterparts. Congress has previously attempted to correct GI Bill inequities between Active Duty and Reserve Component service members.

H.R. 7543, the Guard and Reserve GI Bill Parity Act, would grant National Guard and Reservist service members Post-9/11 GI Bill eligibility for every day spent in service to this country. Specifically, this legislation would ensure that Guard and Reservists receive credit for every day they spend in uniform in a federal duty status under titles 10 or 32 for GI Bill purposes. This following service would count towards earning the Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits: conducting operations, training, attending military schools, conducting weekend drills, completion of annual training requirements, or responding to national disasters.

The Guard and Reserve GI Bill Parity Act of 2024 would universally address this inequity for all duty statuses. DAV fully supports H.R. 7543, the Guard and Reserve GI Bill Parity Act, in accordance with DAV Resolution No. 542. We must remove barriers to continued education and ensure full access and use of earned benefits.

H.R. 7896, the Veterans Education and Technical Skills Opportunity Act of 2024

More and more student veterans are gravitating towards virtual educational programs and we need to ensure that they have the same access to online learning as their non-veteran counterparts.

H.R. 7896, the Veterans Education and Technical Skills (VETS) Opportunity Act of 2024, or VETS Opportunity Act, would change the criteria for the approval of certain independent study programs under VA educational assistance programs. Specifically, it would update the definition of eligible institutions of higher education in relation to student financial assistance programs. By expanding post-9/11 GI Bill eligibility to include high-quality, partially online certificate programs in areas, such as welding, Computer Numerical Control machining, and heating, ventilation, air conditioning and refrigeration, this legislation ensures veterans have access to opportunities that align with the needs of employers.

DAV fully supports H.R. 7896, the VETS Opportunity Act, in accordance with DAV Resolution No. 542. We support giving student veterans more opportunities, through programs like independent study, to pursue their educational goals.

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

The U.S. agricultural industry not only provides daily necessities, but millions of stable, enriching careers. There are many jobs in agriculture that are in high demand, including supportive positions like truck drivers, construction workers, engineers, and mechanics. There are direct agriculture related careers in biotech industries developing new and (we hope) better seeds, chemists working to find new herbicides and insecticides, soil analysts, as well as marketing positions that help bring crops to the supermarket shelves.

H.R. 7920, the Agriculture Grants (AG) for Veterans Education and Training Services (VETS) Act, or AG VETS Act, would establish a program where the Secretary of Agriculture will award competitive grants to eligible entities, such as cooperative extension services, land-grant colleges, non-land-grant colleges of agriculture, Hispanic-serving agricultural colleges and universities, state departments of agriculture, nonprofit organizations, community-based organizations, or combinations thereof.

These grants are intended to support the establishment and enhancement of farming and ranching opportunities for veterans. The funds are to be used for training, education, curriculum development, workshops, tours, field experiences, or other activities that increase veterans' participation in agriculture. Recipients would be required to match the grant amount with non-federal funds. The bill would authorize \$5 million annually for fiscal years 2025 through 2029 to support this initiative.

DAV fully supports H.R. 7920, the AG VETS Act, in accordance with DAV Resolution No. 542. We must ensure that veterans are afforded the opportunity to develop proper skills and gain meaningful employment to take care of themselves and support their families.

H.R. 8514, to provide for an annual increase in stipend for books, supplies, equipment, and other educational costs under VA's Post-9/11 Educational Assistance Program

According to the website educationdata.org, the average cost of books and supplies varies widely between programs.

- At public 4-year institutions, students pay an average of \$1,220 annually for textbooks and supplies.
- Books and supplies at private, non-profit institutions average \$1,215; at private, for-profit institutions, the average cost is \$990.
- At public 2-year institutions, students pay an average of \$1,467 each year for books and supplies.

- At private, nonprofit institutions, books and supplies average \$930; at private, for-profit 2-year colleges, the average cost is \$1,501.

H.R. 8514 would increase the monthly stipend for books and supplies from \$1,000 to \$1,400 and on an annual basis beginning with fiscal year 2025. The increase would be tied to the Consumer Price Index and based on the average U.S. city for the 12-month period ending on June 30 preceding the beginning of the fiscal year for which the increase is made. The increased percentage amount would be rounded to the nearest dollar.

In accordance with DAV Resolution No. 157, DAV supports H.R. 8514, as this legislation would help defray associated costs for service-disabled veterans and survivors using their educational benefits.

H.R. 8560, the End Veteran Homelessness Act of 2024

Many veterans experience post-deployment readjustment issues and conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injuries and substance use disorders. These conditions acquired during or worsened by military service often make veterans' participation in the workforce difficult or impossible and can make them more prone to homelessness.

VA initiatives to end homelessness among veterans through enhanced collaboration with other federal, state, faith-based, VSO and community partners have made significant in-roads in decreasing homelessness among our nation's veterans.

The End Veteran Homelessness Act would have case managers prioritize assistance to vulnerable homeless veterans, including veterans who are homeless and have disabilities (including chronic mental illness, chronic substance abuse disorders or chronic physical disabilities). A homeless veteran or a veteran at risk of being homeless who the VA determines does not require case management, may be afforded a HUD-VASH voucher if the use is included in the notice of operating requirements of the program.

The bill would authorize payment of administrative fees to the public housing agencies for costs of administering vouchers and other eligible expenses used to facilitate the leasing of the vouchers, such as security deposits and other cost related to retention and support of participating owners. It also requires the Government Accounting Office (GAO) to complete and submit a report with specific information as it pertains to the HUD-VASH program to the appropriate congressional committees.

In accordance with DAV Resolution No. 083, DAV fully supports H.R. 8560, the End Veteran Homelessness Act. We urge Congress to authorize vouchers through the

Department of Housing and Urban Development and require the VA to provide effective case management, health and supportive services necessary for homeless veterans to stay housed.

H.R. 8592, the Warriors to Workforce Act

The VA currently pays a veteran up to \$1,000 each academic year while they are in an apprenticeship or other on-the-job training program.

This draft legislation would increase the amount of educational assistance paid by the VA to an eligible individual during the first year of a full-time program of apprenticeship or other on-the-job training from 80% to 90%.

We support this legislation in accordance with DAV Resolution No. 157. Transitioning service members and veterans benefit from apprenticeship programs and we support increasing the amount of the educational assistance to 90% for full-time program participants.

H.R. 8627, the Student Veteran Debt Relief Act of 2024

Currently, a veteran is responsible for keeping track of their tuition and fee account balance. Veterans are advised to visit their school's financial office regularly to review their account, ensure the charges are correct and that payments and refunds are processed correctly. Veterans are also encouraged to contact their school certified official to make sure the certification sent to the VA matches their schedule. Currently, the veteran is held responsible if an overpayment is created.

This draft legislation would transfer responsibility for overpayment to the VA and no longer hold a veteran, eligible person or educational institution at fault. The veteran, eligible person or educational institution would have to show that the VA made the error in eligibility or that the DoD provided incorrect information to the VA about the veteran or the eligible person for educational assistance.

If the VA determines that the overpayment to the veteran or eligible person would likely result in the inability for them to continue in their course or program, the VA will determine if the liability is eligible for a hardship waiver or try to recover the overpayment from the veteran or eligible person.

If the VA cannot recover the overpayment from the veteran or eligible person, the VA would be required to contact the Under Secretary for Benefits to attempt to recover the overpayment or establish a payment plan with the veteran or eligible person.

The legislation would ensure that the VA may not recover an overpayment unless it is identified and the educational institution has been notified of the overpayment. Additionally, not more than 10 years can pass before the overpayment can be collected by the Department.

In accordance with DAV Resolution No. 097, we support this draft legislation. DAV supports legislation that requires the VA to waive any additional amounts of debt created by its own lack of timely action on evidence and information received regarding education changes.

H.R. 8646, the Modernizing the Veterans On-Campus Experience Act of 2024

This draft legislation would expand the use of VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) counselors to more than one institution of higher learning and lower the number of people that they are required to provide services to from 50 to 25 individuals.

The VSOC program aims to help veterans, service members, and their qualified dependents succeed and thrive through a coordinated delivery of on-campus benefits assistance and counseling, leading to completion of their education and preparing them to enter the labor market in viable careers.

VSOC counselors are easily accessible on campuses, which helps to quickly resolve any problems that could potentially interfere with a veteran's educational program, to include assisting with disability accommodations. If needed, they can also provide referrals for health services through VA Medical Centers, Community-Based Outpatient Clinics, or Vet Centers.

DAV supports this draft legislation in accordance with DAV Resolution No. 542. Disabled veterans participating in Veterans Readiness and Employment benefit from having VSOCs available to assist them with any barriers to their educational goals. This draft bill would help ensure that VA is effectively utilizing this important resource.

H.R. 8661, the Reforming Education for Veterans Act

This draft legislation would allow a student veteran that has received orders to go back to active duty to withdraw from a period of education, take a leave of absence or enter into an agreement with the institution of higher learning concerning the course of education and determine if the course has been satisfactorily completed. The institution of higher learning may enter into an agreement with a student veteran if they have completed at least half of a course of covered education.

This legislation would also require the VA to notify the school certifying official (SCO) of any updates to the SCO handbook within 14 business days of the update.

In accordance with DAV Resolution No. 157, we support this draft bill as it would improve VA's education benefit for service-disabled veterans. Specifically, this legislation would protect the student veteran from having to retake a course of education if called back to active duty.

Draft bill, the VA Home Loan Program Reform Act

This draft legislation would allow the VA to perform certain actions if a veteran is faced with foreclosure of a VA-backed home loan, to include:

- Paying the holder of the loan guaranteed an amount necessary to avoid foreclosure of the loan;
- Requiring the holder of the loan and the veteran to execute all documents necessary to ensure the VA obtains a secured interest in the property covered by the loan;
- Requiring the holder of the loan to take any actions necessary to carry out these actions, including preparing, executing, transmitting, receiving and recording documents, and requiring the holder of the loan to place the loan in forbearance.

The legislation authorizes VA to carry out a program, to be known as the "Partial Claim Program" under which the Department may make a partial claim if the VA determines that such loan is in default or at risk of defaulting. The amount of a partial claim will not exceed 20% of the unpaid principle balance of the guaranteed loan.

Provisions in the bill also allow the VA to establish guidelines to protect its interest in this program and include specific consequences for the individual or entity that had the VA-backed loan if default or foreclosure occurs while in the program.

Additionally, any decision made by the VA on a partial claim would not be subject to judicial review. Nor would any decision made on a partial claim be treated as a decision under the law that affects another benefit. The VA may not make a partial claim after September 30, 2026.

DAV has no resolution specific to this issue and therefore takes no position on this draft legislation.

Draft bill, the VA Housing Loan Forever Act of 2023

This draft legislation would allow the transfer of the VA home loan benefits of the veteran to one or more legatees of the veteran. The veteran would have had to have

served during a specific time period and not used their home loan benefits during their lifetime.

The VA home loan benefits of a deceased veteran could be transferred to an individual if they apply for the benefits during a 10-year period and have been determined by the VA to be a legatee of the veteran. The term “legatee” is defined as: a spouse or surviving spouse; a biological or legally adopted child; a grandchild; and any other direct descendant.

Once identified as the legatee of the veteran, that individual would be entitled to receive the full housing loan benefits of the veteran. The legatee of the veteran could use the benefits immediately upon such transfer but could not transfer the housing loan benefits to another individual. A veteran may revoke the benefit of transferring their housing loan benefits to a legatee by written notice to the VA.

DAV has no resolution specific to this issue; therefore takes no position on this draft legislation.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. We appreciate the opportunity to provide our views on the legislation before the Subcommittee and look forward to addressing questions members may have.