



**TESTIMONY OF
STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA**

**BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**HEARING ON THE TOPIC OF:
EXAMINING the EFFECTIVENESS of the VETERANS READINESS
and EMPLOYMENT (VR&E) PROGRAM**

December 11, 2024

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and Members of the Subcommittee: Thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America (SVA) to testify on effectiveness of the Veterans Readiness and Employment (VR&E) Program.

With a mission focused on empowering student veterans, SVA is committed to providing an educational experience that goes beyond the classroom. Through a dedicated and expansive network of on-campus chapters across the country, SVA aims to inspire yesterday's warriors by connecting student veterans with a community of like-minded chapter leaders. Every day these passionate leaders work to provide the necessary resources, network support, and advocacy to ensure student veterans, military-connected students, their families and survivors can effectively connect, expand their skills, and ultimately achieve their greatest potential.

The Veteran Readiness & Employment (VR&E)

The Veteran Readiness & Employment (VR&E) program—formerly known as Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment—has continually evolved to better serve veterans and service members with service-connected disabilities. This unique program is designed to help them prepare for, secure, and sustain meaningful and suitable employment.

In 2008, Congress passed the Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act in 2008 that improved and enhanced benefits for veterans.¹ Additionally, it required the VA to conduct a 20-year longitudinal study of veterans who applied for, and entered a plan of service, in the VR&E program.² The primary goal of this study is to determine the long-term post-program outcomes across (1) Employment; (2) Income; (3) Home Ownership; and (4) Use of Supplemental Programs. The study indicated that rehabilitated participants have had consistently better financial outcomes compared to persisting or discontinued participants. On average, the rehabilitated veterans who reported current or recent employment earned an average of \$21,000 more than discontinued Veterans who also reported. Regarding the programs' satisfaction, at least 90% of all participants rate their overall satisfaction as high.

The findings indicate that rehabilitated veterans achieve greater stability and better outcomes compared to those who discontinued VR&E. They also show a consistent improvement in post-program outcomes over time.

SVA's Commitment to Supporting Veterans Through the VR&E Program

SVA has consistently supported veterans in accessing and navigating the VR&E program. Over the years, SVA has provided numerous resources and tools to ensure veterans can successfully utilize these benefits. For example, our Disability Services Liaison Toolkit, introduced in 2018, offers detailed guidance for veterans on collaborating with campus disability services, Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) VR&E VRCs (VRCs), and VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) representatives to enhance educational and career outcomes.

SVA has also remained proactive in communicating updates and protecting benefits during critical times. In 2019, SVA reassured veterans that VA education benefits, including VR&E, would continue to be funded during a government shutdown, preventing disruption to veterans' education and training plans. Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, SVA advocated for the passage of the REMOTE Act in 2021, which extended emergency protections for VA education benefits and reinstated provisions to help student veterans impacted by the crisis.

SVA launched the SVA Advising Center in January of this year to offer personalized academic and career counseling, helping veterans optimize their education benefits and align them with their long-term goals, which

¹ Public Law 110 - 389 - Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act of 2008

² Veterans Benefits Administration. Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) Longitudinal Study: VR&E Report 2023 for FY 2022. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023.

has been particularly useful for transitioning servicemembers with disabilities.

Through these efforts, Student Veterans of America has shown a commitment to advocating for veterans, improving access to resources, and fostering career success through education and readiness initiatives. Their work ensures that veterans have the tools, guidance, and advocacy they need to thrive in their post-service lives.

SVA's advocacy has remained persistent because of the ongoing feedback about the ongoing challenges faced by VR&E program participants. At our conferences, campus events, and in one-on-one outreach meetings, student veterans have voiced their frustration while simultaneously praising the potential for the VR&E program for its impact on veterans with disabilities.

SVA actively engages with school certifying officials (SCOs) by attending conferences like the Western Association of Veteran Education Specialists (WAVES), Florida Association of Veteran Education Specialists (FAVES), Association of Veterans Education Certifying Officials (AVECO), and the National Association of Veterans' Program Administrators (NAVPA) where they gather valuable feedback on the challenges VR&E presents to both SCOs and student veterans. These interactions provide insights into how the program impacts student outcomes and campus environments. SVA uses this feedback to develop actionable strategies, working collaboratively with other veteran service organizations to address issues, improve program outcomes, support educators, and enhance student success.

SVA actively collaborates with both congressional staff and the VA to ensure the success of veterans utilizing the VR&E program. By advocating for legislative and policy improvements, SVA works closely with policymakers to address the challenges faced by student veterans and enhance the effectiveness of the program. Simultaneously, SVA engages with VA officials to streamline processes, improve communication, and ensure that the program's resources are accessible and impactful for veterans. This dual approach allows SVA to bridge the gap between policy and implementation, driving meaningful changes that empower veterans to achieve their educational and career goals.

SVA VR&E Exploration Survey

To gather information from our own population of student veterans using the VR&E program, SVA recently deployed a survey probing into the likelihood of recommendation, access to VRCs, communication with VRCs, primary outcomes of participation, and challenges for veterans who have used or are using the program to complete a degree.³

Program Successes

The VR&E program has proven transformative for many veterans, enabling them to pursue educational goals, complete degrees, and acquire the skills necessary for civilian employment.

According to our survey, 78% of student veterans would recommend the program to their peers, underscoring its potential to positively impact lives.⁴ Only 5% would not recommend the program, while 17% were unsure whether they would or not.⁵ Nearly 49% of survey respondents completed a degree or vocational training through VR&E, and an additional 38% were still pursuing their education.⁶

³ SVA, 2024, VR&E Exploration.

⁴ Id.

⁵ Id.

⁶ Id.

Veterans frequently highlight the impact of supportive and proactive VRCs. One student shared: *“My first counselor was fantastic. I worked with him for close to two years, and he helped me successfully pursue my education. His guidance truly changed my life.”* Another student shared that their *“case manager went above and beyond to support my education during my time in the program.”* Other veterans highlighted the access to upgraded equipment, such as laptops, has enabled them to succeed in academic settings. These success stories illustrate the power of VR&E when functioning at its best.

Persistent Challenges

While the program has its merits, significant barriers undermine its effectiveness for too many veterans.

According to our survey, over a third of veterans reported that their VRCs were rarely or never available by phone.⁷ Delays in responses—sometimes weeks or months—led to setbacks in academic and career progress. Nearly half of the respondents (48%) reported meeting with their VRC within 1–3 months of entering the program.⁸ However, almost 20% waited 4–6 months or longer, which correlated with a higher likelihood of dissatisfaction.⁹ VRC accessibility varied widely with 38% reporting that their VRC was rarely or never available and only one-in-four reporting their VRC was always reachable.¹⁰

A student veteran suggested that the VA *“provide clear cut program requirements. The state VA told me that some counselors will approve anything, some will deny everything. I was medically retired at 100% and pursuing a STEM degree was not pushed past my counselor, but the degree I have is useless to me due to my disabilities.”*¹¹

The frequent turnover among VRCs disrupts the continuity and forces the veterans to repeatedly rebuild their individualized plans from the ground up. This constant reshuffling not only hindered their ability to make meaningful progress but also eroded trust in the system designed to support them. Compounding this issue, the inconsistency of knowledge and training among VRCs had led to varying interpretations of how program policies were interpreted and applied. These disparities left veterans grappling with contradictory guidance, further exacerbating their frustration and confusion. Without a reliable framework of support, many veterans felt lost, struggling to navigate a system meant to aid their personal and professional growth.

One student veteran commented on the need for better VRC retention, saying, *“My first VRC was fantastic, I worked with him for close to 2 years, but when he left for other opportunities I was left in limbo for about a year until I was given a new counselor who was around for roughly 6 months, and my last counselor who I worked with for roughly 6 months was almost impossible to get ahold of.”*

According to our survey, nearly 20% of our veterans waited over three months to meet their VRCs. SVA has heard from some students that they have an expected wait time of eighteen months until they are able to meet with their VRCs. This wait time is crucial and is the beginning of a series of barriers between the veteran and their benefits.

The increasing number of bureaucratic delays for essential expenses such as books, supplies, and equipment has left an undue financial burden on those it is meant to support. These delays force veterans to shoulder out-of-pocket costs for extended periods, often creating significant stress and hindering their ability to focus on their education or training. Veterans with service-connected disabilities, who already navigate a myriad of complex

⁷ Id.

⁸ Id.

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ Id.

¹¹ Id.

challenges, often struggle to meet full-time enrollment requirements, placing them at risk of having their benefits revoked. Some student veterans felt their mental health, dental care, and accessibility needs were frequently neglected or insufficiently addressed. The consequences of all these factors can be severe, including homelessness for some.

Some respondents indicated the scarcity of post-graduation support, particularly job placement services, leaving them to navigate employment challenges independently. They also expressed significant frustration over the lack of guidance and resources for pursuing nontraditional career paths, including self-employment.

These challenges are echoed by the many SCOs that SVA has interacted with. SVA has heard from many SCOs about the increased administrative burden resulting from a myriad of requirements that govern the administration of VA educational benefits – exacerbated by a lack of timely and consistent guidance from VA. The resulting confusion and strain on SCOs' time diminishes their ability to serve student veterans at the level many hope to. Based on extensive feedback from SCOs, this appears to be an issue impacting many institutions, with the negative impacts ultimately trickling down to student veterans. This is why SVA has made addressing the negative trickle-down impacts of institutional administrative burdens by reviewing VA education policies for inefficiencies and exploring ways to add more school certifying officials on campuses one of our top priorities.

Even though SVA does not represent SCOs, their concerns become ours when they relate to an SCO's ability to properly serve student veterans. We also hear from student veterans that there are not enough SCOs on their campuses to adequately address the needs of all the student veterans using benefits.¹² This overlap in feedback from SCOs and the student veterans they serve is concerning because it suggests there may be a very real problem with VA's currently recommended ratio of one SCO to every 200 GI Bill students.

SVA continuously encourages more discussion around the VR&E program with VA and a focus on specific areas of concern, such as the lack of VRCs, difficulty in contacting VA to determine eligibility, long timelines in the assessment process, inconsistent VRC guidance and accessibility, among others.¹³

SVA Policy Priorities Regarding VR&E

SVA remains steadfast in our dedication to advocating for the needs of student veterans and elevating their voices on Capitol Hill. These needs mostly originate from direct interactions with students during the SVA Regional Summits, Leadership Institute, Washington Week, and National Conference. Our policy priorities are also informed by industry research from our partners at public and private organizations as well as our own research conducted on behalf of our members and chapters. Our priorities fall into the following five categories.

- VA Modernization
- GI Bill Improvements
- Post-Traditional Student Success
- Strengthening Higher Education
- Transparency and Accountability

As a cornerstone of the Department of Veterans Affairs' efforts to support our veterans in their transition to civilian life, the VR&E program has shown promise but also faces significant challenges. This program is a key focus for SVA as it intersects with all five of our aforementioned policy priorities.

¹² Dudley-Miller, V., & Radel, J. (2020). Experiences and challenges of students with a military background at an academic medical center. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 6(1), 112-121.

¹³ <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-20-28.pdf>

1. *Address concerns with VR&E processes and personnel to ensure accountability and consistency for eligible veterans.*

In 2021, VA announced a self-identified change in how it assesses eligibility for VR&E as it relates to other veterans' education benefits. In short, a veteran may use their VR&E eligibility up to a 36-month cap and then, separately, use another education benefit, such as the Post-9/11 GI Bill, up to its own 36-month cap, with a total cap of 48 months.¹⁴ SVA would like to commend VA for identifying and changing its interpretation. This change provides a greater benefit to eligible veterans and complies with the underlying statute.

VR&E is one of the most flexible and important programs in VA's portfolio. In certain scenarios, it provides a vastly greater benefit than even the generous Post-9/11 GI Bill. Particularly considering the recent update to entitlement charges by VA, it is more important than ever to thoroughly review this program for obstacles, barriers, and shortfalls that prevent it from fulfilling its true potential as a benefit.

We look forward to working with the Subcommittee on the best path forward for the program.

2. *Comprehensively review and update Monthly Housing Allowance (MHA) calculations to address gaps and disparities such as those related to Veteran Readiness & Employment (VR&E), break pay, overseas institutions, and online instruction.*

SVA supports GI Bill improvements because it is not only a matter of fulfilling our moral obligation to support those who have served our country but also a smart investment in our nation's future prosperity and security. By enhancing the GI Bill, we can empower veterans to succeed in civilian life and continue to make valuable contributions to our communities and society.

One of the many GI Bill improvements that SVA has advocated for this year is to comprehensively review and update Monthly Housing Allowance (MHA) calculations to address gaps and disparities such as those related to Veteran Readiness & Employment (VR&E), break pay, overseas institutions, and online instruction.

Prompted by student veteran voices, this policy priority from the GI Bill improvement section advocates for legislatively updating the Monthly Housing Allowance (MHA) to account for factors such as Veteran Readiness & Employment (VR&E), break pay, overseas institutions, and online instruction. These updates are crucial to ensuring that student veterans have the financial support they need to pursue their education without undue financial strain, especially given the unique challenges they may face as non-traditional students balancing military service with academic pursuits. Several factors necessitate urgent legislative action to modernize MHA.

It is worth noting that DOD has implemented emergency BAH rate corrections for the last two years to address the "financial burden of rising housing costs facing Servicemembers" and circumstances making "it especially challenging for Servicemembers and their families in the affected [areas] to find affordable housing..."¹⁵ Data also show that more than a quarter of student veterans take out student loans, with 58 percent doing so to cover living expenses and the most common being housing costs.¹⁶ Whether it be the lower subsistence rates for VR&E compared to Post-9/11 MHA, the lack of payment for periods between academic terms, the flat rate for overseas learners, or inequities in distance learners' MHA, student veterans have raised concerns about the efficacy of

¹⁴ See VBA FAQ: 48 Month Rule FAQ. DEP'T VETERANS AFFAIRS. https://www.benefits.va.gov/GIBILL/docs/48_Month_Rule_FAQs.pdf

¹⁵ Press Release, Department of Defense, DoD Authorizes a Temporary Increase to 2021 Basic Allowance for Housing Rates for Certain Locations (Sept. 24, 2021), <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2788871/dod-authorizes-a-temporary-increase-to-2021-basic-allowance-for-housing-rates-f/>; DoD Authorizes an Automatic Increase to 2022 BAH Rates for Certain Locations, DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE (Sept. 22, 2022), <https://www.travel.dod.mil/About/News/Article/Article/3167951/dod-authorizes-an-automatic-increase-to-2022-bah-rates-for-certain-locations/>.

¹⁶ Phillip Oliff, Scott Brees & Richa Bhattarai, *Why Veterans with GI Bill Benefits Still Take Out Student Loans*, PEW (Jan. 7, 2022), <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2022/01/07/why-veterans-with-gi-bill-benefits-still-take-out-student-loans>,

MHA broadly and its disconnect from the needs of today's student veterans. SVA believes it is time to review certain fundamental assumptions underlying MHA.

The inclusion of factors such as Veteran Readiness & Employment (VR&E), break pay, and online instruction is essential for accurately reflecting the full cost of living for student veterans. We encourage Congress to consider the following recommendations to ensure MHA meets the needs of today's student veterans.

VR&E subsistence rates. For years, student veterans have shared concerns about affording basic necessities while pursuing their VR&E individualized training and education plans, concerns echoed in a 2014 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report which found that veterans may discontinue their plans before completion due to financial pressures.¹⁷ This issue exists primarily due to VR&E having two different subsistence rates: the internal VR&E subsistence rate and the much higher Post-9/11 MHA rate.

The standard VR&E rate is substantially lower than the Post-9/11 MHA rate and based on several factors, such as rate of attendance, number of dependents, and training type.¹⁸ The maximum rate possible under this model requires a student to have two dependents and scarcely reaches the national average MHA under Ch. 33. Raising the VR&E subsistence rate to the Post-9/11 MHA rate reduces bureaucracy, eliminates confusion, encourages program utilization, and ensures greater fairness in benefits for veterans with service-connected disabilities.

Break pay. Break pay provisions are crucial for addressing financial gaps that arise during academic breaks, such as summer recess or holiday periods. Many student veterans rely on housing allowances to cover living expenses during these breaks, but current MHA policies may not adequately address these periods of non-enrollment. The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Improvements Act of 2010 removed interval pay, otherwise known as break pay, from the GI Bill. Reinstating break pay is one of the top policy recommendations shared by student veterans.

We understand there are significant cost considerations when it comes to break pay, but it is important to remember that student veterans are post-traditional, meaning they are pursuing education without parity in the support structure many traditional students use during school breaks. We continue to hear from student veterans throughout the year about the financial difficulties that occur between terms. SVA asks that Congress explore options to provide relief to our student veterans in a way that is both consistent with the intent of the law and fiscally responsible. Updating the MHA to include break pay ensures continuous financial support for student veterans throughout the academic year, reducing the risk of financial instability during periods of transition between semesters.

Overseas rates. Recognizing the unique circumstances of student veterans attending overseas institutions is essential for promoting access to higher education opportunities abroad. Many student veterans choose to pursue academic programs offered by international institutions, either through study abroad programs or distance learning options. We have also heard from students about the overseas MHA rate, recently changed to the U.S. national average, not being adequate for their training locale. However, existing MHA policies may not accurately reflect the cost of living in foreign countries, or the additional expenses associated with studying abroad.

By updating the MHA to account for overseas institutions, Congress can facilitate greater educational mobility for student veterans and promote global engagement through higher education. We recommend this Subcommittee review ways to either more appropriately match the MHA rate with overseas locations,

¹⁷ U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE, VA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AND EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM – FURTHER PROGRAM MANAGEMENT IMPROVEMENTS ARE NEEDED 6 (Feb. 27, 2014), available at <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-14-61>.

¹⁸ *Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) Subsistence Allowance Rates*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (Sept. 29, 2021), https://www.benefits.va.gov/vocrehab/subsistence_allowance_rates.asp.

or simply use the relevant DOD Overseas Housing Allowance (OHA) rate or national average, whichever is greater. VA already uses DOD's BAH rates to determine MHA rates for domestic students and OHA rates for those in U.S. territories. We believe using the OHA rate for overseas GI Bill students is a common-sense solution that provides a more equitable housing rate and establishes consistency in the methods VA uses to establish those rates.

Distance learner rates. Many student veterans opt for online degree programs to accommodate their military obligations or family responsibilities or have been shifted into online courses by their institution, post-pandemic, but current MHA rates may not adequately account for the cost of living in their respective locations. By adjusting the MHA to reflect the unique needs of online learners, Congress can ensure that student veterans receive equitable financial support regardless of their mode of instruction.

SVA supports H.R. 5702, *the Expanding Access for Online Veteran Students Act*, which would increase the online Monthly Housing Allowance (MHA) rate to the full national average for GI Bill students enrolled fully online during the summer. While SVA would have preferred full parity between local in-person and the online rates, we recognize that this bill will nevertheless have a substantially positive financial impact on VA education beneficiaries enrolled online over the summer by helping them cover a far greater percentage of their housing cost.

We thank this Subcommittee staff for their work on this legislation, and we applaud the leadership of Representatives Ciscomani, Stanton, Stansbury, and Van Orden for introducing this forward-thinking legislative proposal. For years, online GI Bill students have received only half the national average in MHA. This is despite the GI Bill paying tuition and fees similarly for both in-person and online students. Due to the steadily increasing number of online courses at many institutions, including flagship colleges and universities, we now see this disparity, paradoxically, even impacting otherwise in-person students.

Lag in BAH rate revisions and updates translating to MHA. Student veterans do not see updates to their MHA reflective of changes to underlying BAH rates until August of every year. This issue was brought to our attention by student veterans at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, an institution located in an area for which DOD had sanctioned a temporary BAH increase in 2022. As noted above, DOD has implemented temporary BAH increases for the past two years to address the fact that rates weren't keeping pace with the cost of living in certain areas. DOD also implements new standard rates every January. Statute requires MHA rates be updated every August, but that means there is a period of several months where student veterans are receiving what is, by that time, an outdated housing allowance.¹⁹ SVA believes this lag time is wholly unnecessary and that it negatively impacts student veterans' ability to pay for housing. We ask that Congress eliminate the gap period by requiring MHA rates to be updated immediately upon DOD implementation, whether on a temporary or standard basis.

We thank the Subcommittee for considering the various buckets of MHA reform that are needed to ensure the benefit appropriately and adequately addresses the needs of today's student veterans to pursue higher education without facing undue financial strain. By addressing factors such as VR&E participation, break pay, overseas institutions, and online instruction, Congress can promote equity, accessibility, and opportunity for those who have served our country in uniform. Failure to act risks undermining the educational aspirations and economic well-being of our nation's veterans, with far-reaching consequences for individuals, families, and communities across the country.

¹⁹ See 38 U.S.C § 3313(i) (requiring that "[a]ny monthly housing stipend payable under this section during the academic year beginning on August 1 of a calendar year shall be determined utilizing rates for basic allowances for housing payable under section 403 of title 37 in effect as of January 1 of such calendar year.") (emphasis added).

3. *Call for additional funding for VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) locations and veteran centers.*

SVA supports post-traditional student success, particularly among veterans, as a moral imperative and a wise investment in our nation's future. By providing the necessary support and resources, we honor veterans' service, maximize the return on their education benefits, strengthen the workforce, enrich our communities, and empower individuals to achieve their aspirations.

The VSOC program is one of the few programs administered by VA that SVA hears about which is uniformly positive. Despite this, over its lifetime, the program has only expanded to approximately twenty schools beyond its original ninety-or-so. This program is popular, providing tremendous help and guidance to student veterans and schools. SVA supports S. 1910, *Ensuring VetSuccess On Campus Act of 2023*, which would require VA to ensure a VSOC program is located in every state.

SVA thanks the Subcommittee for exploring key aspects of the VR&E program, including its staffing, management, outcomes, overall effectiveness, and areas for improvement, which would impact student veterans in higher education. Thank you for the opportunity to address the critical issues surrounding the VR&E program.

4. *Protect and Restore Study Abroad Opportunities for GI Bill and VR&E students.*

In August 2020, VA enacted a revised interpretation of 38 U.S.C. § 3680A(f), the statute underlying the approvals of study abroad programs for student veterans. These requirements restricted the ability for student veterans to attend some of the most common and popular study abroad programs available.²⁰ In response to these changes, SVA and the National Association of Foreign Student Advisors (NAFSA) wrote a letter to Secretary McDonough asking him to reconsider these administrative changes that create obstacles to student veterans pursuing opportunities to study abroad.²¹ VA's response to our letter made clear that the agency believes their revised interpretation is strictly compliant with the underlying statute and they have no room to provide relief to the affected students.²²

While we understand VA's position as appropriate to the letter of the law, we believe this change creates unnecessary obstacles to an increasingly necessary component of many higher education programs and inequity between the treatment of student veterans and Title IV students as it relates to studying abroad. SVA believes that student veterans should be given the same opportunity to study abroad and develop the skillset they need to enter a global workforce as ED provides their Title IV classmates.

In short, and as seen in our joint letter to VA:

"It is vital to ensure all students have access to a quality education that will prepare them for the global workforce into which they will graduate. Therefore, we urge the Department to work with relevant stakeholders in higher education and study abroad to review the current VBA guidance on the use of Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits for study abroad and to consider following a similar approach to that of the U.S. Department of Education's Title IV Federal Student Aid program, which allows the use of these funds for study abroad programs that award academic credit."²³

²⁰ Institute of International Education (IIE), "Duration of Study Abroad," Open Doors Report 2020 (New York: IIE, 2020), <https://opendoorsdata.org/data/us-study-abroad/duration-of-study-abroad>.

²¹ Letter from NAFSA and SVA to the Honorable Denis R. McDonough, Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs (April 20, 2021), <https://www.nafsa.org/sites/default/files/media/document/nafsa-sva-042021.pdf>.

²² Letter from Thomas J. Murphy, Acting Under Secretary of Benefits to NAFSA and SVA (June 15, 2021), <https://www.nafsa.org/sites/default/files/media/document/va-nafsa-061521.pdf>.

²³ Letter from NAFSA and SVA to the Honorable Denis R. McDonough, Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs (April 20, 2021), <https://www.nafsa.org/sites/default/files/media/document/nafsa-sva-042021.pdf>.

Thankfully, these Subcommittee stewarded critical legislation that passed as part of the Veterans Auto and Education Improvement Act of 2022, which provides a five-year grace period allowing additional study abroad programs to be approved for VA education benefits subject to certain requirements. SVA is grateful for the Subcommittee' work on this issue.

In recent years, student veterans have reached out to SVA regarding the outdated tuition payment process from the VA to their institutions of higher education. SVA strongly supports Section 214 of H.R. 8371, *Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act* and S. 1090, which would direct VA electronically fund transfer education assistance to foreign institutions of higher education.

Legislation Support VR&E Veterans in 118th Congress

As the 118th Congressional session draws to a close and we look ahead to the 119th, several key pieces of legislation have emerged that aim to enhance the opportunities and support available to veterans, particularly those enrolled in the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program. These bills, including H.R. 746, H.R. 7653, and H.R. 8567, are designed to address the evolving needs of veterans transitioning to civilian life by expanding educational resources, improving career readiness, and enhancing the accessibility of critical benefits. SVA strongly supports these efforts, advocating for measures that ensure veterans are well-equipped to succeed in both their academic and professional endeavors.

H.R. 746, the Streamlining Aviation for Eligible Veterans Act

SVA supports H.R. 746, *the Streamlining Aviation for Eligible Veterans Act*, which would allow VR&E benefits to be used for non-degree flight programs. While veterans can currently use the Post-9/11 GI Bill for such programs under specific monetary caps and requirements, VR&E and other benefits like DEA are excluded from this opportunity.^{24, 25} SVA recommends that this Subcommittee carefully examine the proposal to ensure it addresses historical concerns surrounding fraud, waste, and abuse in VA-supported flight programs.

SVA acknowledges the potential benefits of creating parity between VR&E and GI Bill benefits but stresses the importance of incorporating robust safeguards. Given the history of Congress imposing and revising restrictions on VA funding for flight programs, SVA emphasizes that any expansion of VR&E benefits should include protections to prevent misuse of taxpayer dollars. Additionally, the legislation should ensure VR&E remains focused on supporting disabled veterans in achieving sustainable and meaningful flight careers.²⁶

H.R. 7653, the Veteran Education and Readiness Yielding (VERY) Act of 2024

SVA proudly supports H.R. 7653, *the Veteran Education and Readiness Yielding (VERY) Act of 2024*, a critical piece of legislation aimed at enhancing educational and professional opportunities for veterans. The VERY Act seeks to strengthen programs that enable veterans to transition successfully from military service to higher education and the civilian workforce. By investing in initiatives like expanded access to GI Bill benefits, support for vocational training, and partnerships between educational institutions and employers, the act aligns closely with

²⁴ See *generally Flight training*, U.S. DEPT' OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (last updated Dec. 6, 2022), <https://www.va.gov/education/about-gi-bill-benefits/how-to-use-benefits/flight-training/>.

²⁵ 38 U.S.C. § 3680A(b); 38 C.F.R. § 21.134.

²⁶ It is not clear that GI Bill flight training safeguards would necessarily extend to VR&E if the current version of this bill passed. Programs must be approved by VA to be paid for by VR&E, but GI Bill and VR&E approval is different. It is unclear whether GI Bill approval requirements for these courses, like those found in 38 U.S.C. 3034, would necessarily apply in the context of VR&E as the two benefits exist in separate chapters, and there is no language clearly incorporating the relevant GI Bill conditions into VR&E statutes or regulations. *Compare* 38 U.S.C § 3034 *with* 38 § C.F.R. 21.292. The relevant GI Bill payment restrictions would also appear to not apply to the use of VR&E benefits for vocational flight training. See 38 U.S.C. § 3313.

SVA's mission to empower student veterans and amplify their contributions to society.

SVA emphasizes the importance of equipping veterans with the tools they need to succeed in an increasingly dynamic economy. The legislation promises to bolster resources for student veterans, including expanded funding for campus support programs and improved access to career readiness services. By addressing the unique challenges faced by transitioning service members and student veterans, H.R. 7653 ensures that those who have served our country are well-prepared to thrive in education, employment, and beyond.

H.R. 8567, Informing VETS Act

SVA strongly supports H.R. 8567, *Informing VETS Act*, a bill designed to enhance awareness and accessibility of the VR&E program. This critical initiative provides veterans with the resources and guidance they need to transition successfully into the civilian workforce. Despite its transformative potential, VR&E has remained underutilized due to limited awareness among eligible veterans. H.R. 8567 aims to change that by ensuring VR&E is no longer a "best-kept secret" and becomes an integral part of the veteran transition process.

SVA underscores the importance of removing barriers to programs like VR&E that empower veterans to achieve their career and educational goals. The legislation seeks to improve outreach and streamline access to VR&E services, ensuring veterans are fully informed of their benefits. By increasing the visibility of VR&E, this bill aligns with SVA's commitment to fostering opportunities for veterans to thrive.

Conclusion

The VR&E program has the potential to be a lifeline for our veterans, but its current shortcomings must be addressed to realize that potential. By prioritizing communication, training, and accessibility, we can honor the service of our veterans by ensuring their successful transition to civilian life.

To maximize the potential of the VR&E program and address its shortcomings, SVA urges the Subcommittee to consider the following recommendations.

- Greater effort should be devoted to increasing awareness of the VR&E program and its benefits, while ensuring veterans have access to clear and comprehensive information about its requirements and available resources.
- Streamlining administrative processes is critical to alleviating the burdens that our veterans face. This efficiency can be achieved by simplifying reimbursement systems, expediting approvals for equipment, and establishing clear and transparent communication channels.
- Expanding job opportunities to include graduate programs, certifications, and nontraditional career paths to reflect the evolving job market in our ever-increasing competitive labor market.
- Increasing staffing levels and improving VRC retention is essential to reducing caseloads and ensure veterans receive consistent support. This can be achieved by hiring additional staff and implementing strategies to foster long-term VRC retention.
- VRCs should be better equipped and trained with the essential knowledge and skills to support the unique needs of the student veteran population including, but not limited to, mental health and disability accommodations. SVA would like to hone in on this recommendation. Without too many

details, one student responded to a survey question describing how *“the VR&E program revoked [his] educational benefits [and put him on interrupted status] based on the fact that [he] was not [enrolled] full time due to service connected disabilities, and was operating at nine units per semester on reduced work capacity due to such conditions for more than three semesters.”* This decision by his VRC *“cost [him] the forfeiture of [his] apartment and [he] was forced to live out of [his] truck for five years, nine months, and 25 days.”* He eventually completed his program out of pocket.

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The continued success of veterans in higher education in the Post-9/11 era is no mistake or coincidence. In our Nation’s history, educated veterans have always been the best of a generation and the key to solving our most complex challenges. Today’s student veterans carry this legacy forward.

We thank the Chairman, Ranking Member, and the Subcommittee Members for your time, attention, and devotion to the cause of veterans, military-connected students, their families, caregivers and survivors.