



**STATEMENT 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:**

**PENDING LEGISLATION**

**June 11, 2025**

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Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and Members of the Subcommittee: Thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit a statement for the record on the legislation pending before you today.

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.

SVA thanks the Subcommittee for considering several pieces of legislation that would impact student veterans, military-connected students, their families, caregivers, and survivors in higher education.

### **H.R. 1965, the Veteran Education Assistance Adjustment Act**

SVA strongly supports H.R. 1965, *the Veteran Education Assistance Adjustment Act*, which would increase the annual book stipend for books, supplies, equipment, and other educational costs under the Post-9/11 GI Bill from \$1,000 to \$1,400 with an Cost-of-Living-Adjustment (COLA).

Earning a college degree is costly. Not only has tuition ballooned outside of the reach of most Americans, but their remaining funds, if any, are consumed by other related expenses. Many expenses like books, supplies and equipment, need to be considered in addition to tuition. The cost of textbooks alone rose at approximately three times the rate of inflation, and their costs double every eleven years.<sup>1</sup> These additional financial burdens can make higher education inaccessible for many students, requiring them to seek alternative funding sources or take on substantial debt.

Textbooks are at the center of the educational experience for most in college. They guide lectures, provide source materials, and give a broader context from which students understand their lessons. Lab equipment provides opportunities to understand lessons safely through practical application and experimentation. Other items required for coursework connect students directly with the substance of their education and are critical in the success of higher education.

The passage of the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Improvements Act of 2010 afforded student veterans \$1,000 per academic year for these necessary instruments.<sup>2</sup> This much-needed provision for crucial and required educational support items has remained stagnant despite significant cost increases over the past decade, placing

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<sup>1</sup> Hanson, Melanie. 2023. "Average Cost of College Textbooks."

<sup>2</sup> Public Law 111-377—JAN. 4, 2011

student veterans squarely in the middle of very tough and unfavorable decisions as to how to pay for them or to forego them.

Last year, SVA conducted a survey of our membership regarding their cost of books and equipment. Nearly 45 percent of respondents indicated paying over the stipend allowance of \$1,000 and of that 45 percent, over half of them were undergraduate students.<sup>3</sup> The SVA survey demonstrated the need to adjust the Chapter 33 stipend for textbooks, materials, equipment, and other educational costs.

SVA would like to thank Representative Vasquez and Representative Valadao for reintroducing this critical piece of legislation this Congress to correct a long-awaited update, which shall help combat the stress on veterans facing rising cost of educational materials and make it easier for them to manage their education expenses. SVA would like to thank the Subcommittee considering this measure.

### **H.R. 2034, the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship Opportunity Act**

SVA supports H.R. 2034, *the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship Opportunity Act*, which would expand eligibility to student veterans who have made significant progress in STEM programs and prioritizing those who have nearly exhausted their benefits.

STEM careers are vital to our Nation's economy, ability to be competitive on the world stage, and national defense, among other things. Student veterans are an excellent match for STEM careers. In fact, SVA research shows that STEM majors are among the most popular degree paths for GI Bill students.<sup>4</sup> Yet, STEM degrees often take longer to complete than others and can push student veterans and other military-connected students beyond the 36 months of education benefits provided by the Post-9/11 GI Bill. The expansion of this scholarship would alleviate the burden a student may have in pursuing a STEM degree, furthering the incentive of completing the degree without financial worry.

The Edith Nourse Rogers STEM scholarship provides an important extension of VA education benefits for those pursuing STEM degrees. However, a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report from September 2022 showed the scholarship has had an alarmingly low participation rate since its inception, raising concerns about barriers preventing beneficiaries from accessing the benefit.<sup>5</sup>

This bill aims to increase scholarship participation rates by eliminating requirements that restrict eligibility by

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<sup>3</sup> SVA, 2024, Book Stipend Exploration

<sup>4</sup> Cate, C.A., Lyon, J.S., Schmeling, J., & Bogue, B.Y., Student Veterans of America, National Veteran Education Success Tracker: *A Report on the Academic Success of Student Veterans Using the Post-9/11 Gi Bill*, 34 (2017).

<sup>5</sup> See Generally U.S. Gov't Accountability Office, GAO-22-105326, Higher Education: *VA Could Improve Support for Veterans Pursuing STEM Degrees* (Sept. 29, 2022), available at <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-105326>.

reducing the number of required credits from 60 to 45 and eliminating the requirement that an applicant must have exhausted their Post-9/11 GI Bill.

SVA applauds Representative Budzinski and Hamadeh for their leadership in advancing this important legislation to ensure more student veterans can fulfill these high-demand jobs.

### **H.R. 2720, the Gold Star Family Education Parity Act**

SVA supports H.R. 2720, *the Gold Star Family Education Parity Act*, which would terminate the Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance (DEA) under 38 United States Code (USC) Chapter 35 and transition all current and future beneficiaries to 38 USC Chapter 33 Post-9/11 Educational Assistance Program starting August 1, 2029.

A DEA beneficiary may be a spouse or dependent of a veteran or servicemember who has died, been captured or is missing, or is permanently and totally disabled due to a service-connected disability.<sup>6</sup> The educational benefits under Chapter 35 and Chapter 33 greatly differ. For example, Chapter 35 only applies to costs associated with institutions of higher learning, non-college degree programs, and on-the-job training and apprenticeships. Chapter 33 is significantly more comprehensive in their benefits for that it consists of direct payments of tuition and fees, a monthly housing allowance (MAH), and money for books and educational supplies.

### **H.R. 2954, the Veterans' Transition to Trucking Act of 2025**

SVA supports H.R. 2954, *the Veterans' Transition to Trucking Act of 2025*, which would lessen the burden of a veteran looking to use their VA education benefits to obtain a Commercial Driver's License (CDL) across the multi-state apprenticeship program.

Currently, an employer operating in more than one state must obtain separate approval from each individual state for veterans to utilize their VA education benefits within those apprenticeship programs. Consequentially, employers are discouraged from navigating the complexities of the regulatory process and accept veterans using their VA benefits. This piece of legislation would authorize the Secretary of the Veterans Affairs to serve as the single approving authority for multi-state trucking apprenticeship programs, eliminating the need for separate approvals from each individual state, and streamlining the process.

SVA would like to thank Ranking Member Pappas and Representative Kiggans for reintroducing this piece of legislation to reduce administrative burdens and expand opportunities for veterans looking to obtain their CDL licenses.

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<sup>6</sup> Department of Veterans' Affairs, *Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance*, (last accessed June 10, 2025). <https://www.va.gov/family-and-caregiver-benefits/education-and-careers/dependents-education-assistance/>.

## **H.R. 3386, the Streamlining the Solid Start Communications Act**

SVA supports H.R. 3386, *the Streamlining the Solid Start Communications Act*, which would allow the VA to expand their “tailored mailings” to other forms of communication such as text messaging, virtual chatting, and other electronic messaging options.

The intent of the Solid Start program was to provide consistent, caring contact between service members and VA to guide them through understanding and using the benefits and resources available to them.<sup>7</sup> This was done via a series of three phone call attempts between the VA and the veteran at the 90-, 180-, and 365- day mark of separation. If the phone call went unanswered, then the VA would follow up with “tailored mailings” to the veterans’ address on file. A veteran not answering the phone may occur for a myriad of reasons, but if they are experiencing financial hardship, homelessness, or mental health challenges. It is unlikely they will be any more responsive to standard “tailored mailings.” The VA updating their forms of communication would ensure broader and more effective engagement with veterans in their transition process.

## **H.R. 3387, the Enhancing the Transitioning Servicemember’s Act**

SVA supports H.R. 3387, *the Enhancing the Transitioning Servicemember’s Act*, which would strengthen the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) by expanding eligibility to 540 days prior to separation, requiring minimum durations for counseling, and allowing repeat attendance on a space-available basis. This legislation would also establish a pilot program for military spouses, mandates individualized financial counseling by qualified professionals, standardizes TAP pathways across all service components, and extends transitional health care coverage from 180 to 270 days.

This legislation would be one step towards creating a seamless transition from the moment a servicemember raises their right hand to taking off the uniform by creating improved coordination between the Department of Defense (DoD), Department of Labor (DoL), and the VA. Alongside the VFW, SVA has been a staunch advocate of improving the transition process, and can be seen in our Statement for the Record (SFR) from the May 17, 2023 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs Economic Hearing discussing TAP. SVA is supportive of the recently signed DOD and VA memorandum of understanding to enhance coordination between the two departments on these efforts.

## **H.R. 3481, the Delivering Digitally to Our Veterans Act of 2025**

SVA supports H.R. 3481, *the Delivering Digitally to Our Veterans Act of 2025*, which would authorize digital methods of communications to inform GI Bill recipients of their educational assistance benefits.

While “traditional methods” of communication, such as United States Postal Service (USPS) and phone calls, for veterans or military-affiliated students, enrolled in institutions of higher learning work, they are becoming

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<sup>7</sup> <https://news.va.gov/79668/va-solid-start-program-helps-veterans-transition-civilian-life/>

increasingly inefficient with the realities of a student veterans' life. A student veteran enrolling in a program at an institution of higher learning will be given the ability to opt-in to receiving electronic correspondence from the VA. A student veteran currently enrolled in a course or program may also opt to receive electronic correspondence, providing a faster, and efficient, method of communication about their educational benefits.

## **H.R. 3579, the Veterans Readiness and Employment Program Integrity Act**

SVA supports Section 4 of H.R. 3579, *the Veterans Readiness and Employment Program Integrity Act*, which would require the Secretary of the VA to submit a report regarding the employment of veterans under the Veterans Readiness and Employment Program (VR&E), formally known as vocational rehabilitation, to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs of the House of Representatives and Senate. Data collection and its publication on VR&E participant employment outcomes, their wages earned, and their wait times (calculated from the date a veteran requests a VR&E program to the date they first meet with their counselor) would provide valuable information on the program's effectiveness and a step towards its improvement.

SVA opposes Section 3 of H.R. 3579, *the Veterans Readiness and Employment Program Integrity Act*, which would place a 365-day maximum limit on employment assistance that a veteran may receive in the VR&E program. The purpose of the VR&E program is to provide all services and assistance necessary to enable veterans with service-connected disabilities to achieve maximum independence in daily living and, to the maximum extent feasible, to become employable and to obtain and maintain suitable employment.<sup>8</sup> A veteran in the program, receiving this employment assistance, may have an issue in which service-connected disability worsens during the 365-day limit, causing them to pause their search until they receive the help they need. If the 365-days lapses, and they need to find another form of suitable employment, conforming with their worsened disability, they will no longer be able to use the employment assistance within the VR&E program. This, potentially, may leave them unemployed and without the help they need to ensure obtain suitable employment.

Regarding Section 2 of H.R. 3579, *the Veterans Readiness and Employment Program Integrity Act*, which would require veterans to apply for VR&E services before receiving an evaluation by a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (VRC), SVA urges Congress to consider the logistical implications of such a requirement. Veterans may have questions about their eligibility, the application process, or whether the VR&E program aligns with their individual needs. If completing an application becomes a prerequisite to speaking with a counselor, it could unintentionally discourage some veterans from engaging with the program at all.

SVA believes veterans should be able to contact relevant VA staff to get answers to these critical questions before being required to submit an application. While a more formal application process might improve program efficiency over time, that outcome is not yet certain.

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<sup>8</sup> 38 U.S.C. § 3100.

## **H.R. 3753, the Expanding Access for Online Veteran Students Act**

SVA supports H.R. 3753, *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 academic year.

For years, online GI Bill students have received only half the national average in MHA (\$1,118.50, compared to the national average of \$2,237)<sup>9</sup>. 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.

In 2023, this issue impacted a student veteran by the name of Josh Jones. He was SVA's Student Veteran of the Year and the former SVA Chapter President at Loyola University in Chicago. Josh saw firsthand how the substantially reduced MHA rate for online learners negatively impacted his in-person peers. Josh and some of his peers needed to enroll in certain courses over the summer but soon realized the institution was only offering those courses online. They eventually found themselves enrolled fully online and left with no choice but to wrestle with the drastic cut in their housing allowance. In Chicago, the full MHA rate is roughly \$2,700, which is reduced to just slightly more than \$1,000 if students are enrolled fully online—a roughly 63 percent reduction. Since then, this issue has become a high priority for SVA.

As remote and asynchronous courses have increasingly more popular since the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to note the potential consequences of bad actors who attempt to take advantage of a veterans' educational benefits. It is important that regulatory measures, such as 90/10 rule, remain in place and protect student veterans from the predatory practices of malintent for-profit institutions. SVA firmly believes there are pragmatic ways to ensure that all online GI Bill students receive a full monthly housing allowance tied to their local cost of living.

SVA would like to thank Representative Ciscomani, Representative Staton, Chairman Van Orden, and Representative Lawler in their bipartisan attempt to address the disparity between students enrolled in classes full-time online versus their in-person counterparts.

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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.

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<sup>9</sup> Post-9/11 GI Bill (Chapter 33) Rates (last accessed June 10, 2025), <https://www.va.gov/education/benefit-rates/post-9-11-gi-bill-rates/>.