

**STRENGTHENING THE WORKFORCE
OF VETERANS IN AMERICA**

HEARING
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC
OPPORTUNITY
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
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TUESDAY, DECEMBER 2, 2025

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:30 a.m., in room 360, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Derrick Van Orden (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Present: Representatives Van Orden, Ciscomani, King-Hinds, Barrett, Pappas, McGarvey, Ramirez, and Kennedy.

OPENING STATEMENT OF DERRICK VAN ORDEN, CHAIRMAN

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Good morning. The subcommittee will come to order. The chair may declare a recess at any time in case we have to run across the street.

Before I begin, I want to take a moment of silence to recognize Sergeant Andrew Wolfe, who is currently recovering, and Specialist Sarah Beckstrom, who was murdered by a terrorist that came here from Afghanistan. Her sacrifice and his struggle will not be forgotten. Please join me in a moment of silence.

[Moment of silence.]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you. I want to thank our witnesses for being here today to discuss ways to strengthen America's workforce with one of the best populations of Americans. Those are veterans. They know where to be, when to be, and what uniform to be in, and they are not on drugs.

The purpose of today's hearing is to examine how the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) provides opportunities for veterans to explore nontraditional education, whether that be through apprenticeship, on-the-job training, or the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). I look forward to continuing the nonpartisan spirit of the subcommittee along with Ranking Member Mr. Pappas, great to see him after Thanksgiving, to ensure that the VA is working in lockstep with today's job market to meet the needs of today's veterans.

Unfortunately, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) was unable to come here today because the Senate has continued to slow walk the confirmation process of President Trump's appointees. I encourage them strongly to just get these people in place. This is not a political issue. We need our political leaders in the executive branch to be able to execute the programs that we write for them.

Last Congress, the Biden administration's U.S. Department of Labor-Veterans' Employment and Training Service (DOL-VETS) consistently failed veterans. We had multiple hearings about that. By the end of the Congress, their employment statistics were worse than a regular American job center. This committee must hear how DOL-VETS is going to turn it around. I look forward to having Mr. Workman testify shortly after he is confirmed.

On this note, we had a rather contentious meeting with Mr. Tim Cummings, who is in place now. I would like to apologize to him for getting a little senior chiefly on him, which I did. I have the utmost confidence in Secretary Chavez-DeRemer and also Secretary Collins to work this out for the betterment of the veterans. That is very important for all of us. We do understand that is a higher purpose.

This hearing is not only getting these VA programs back on track, but also to note the importance of shoring up American manufacturing as a national security issue. I also serve on the House Armed Services Committee, and I cannot tell you enough how badly America needs to reenergize defense manufacturing so that we are always ready for today and tomorrow to defend our way of life. One of the best ways to do this is to show these companies that have jobs available that there are thousands of veterans ready to fill them.

Many veterans use the GI Bill within a year of transitioning out of the military, oftentimes as a fallback option when they do not know what their next mission is. Veterans using VA's On-the-Job Training (OJT) and apprenticeship programs are able to supplement their income with both a living stipend payment from the VA for the post 9-11 GI Bill benefits as well as wages from their employer while they are enrolled in these VA programs. At the end of their training program, they are able to step right into a beneficial career. I do not know of many major programs at institutions of higher learning that can promise a job at the end of their programs. This promise of employment through the apprenticeship training is what makes the VA program so special and can help combat underemployment and suicide in our veterans population.

In VA's most recent annual benefits report, the number of veterans using their post GI Bill to pursue OJT or apprenticeship continues to decline. In 2023, there were only 1,008 apprenticeships and 776 OJT participants representing less than 1 percent of the post GI Bill population. With some states having zero individuals participating in this program, we are spending around \$241 million a year on administrative expenses, which include staff salaries and counseling services, for such a low success rate, and that is just pathetic. I mean, that has just got to stop. The number of veterans in this program and our administrative spending are concerning, especially given the involvement—or the evolving needs of today's workforce in the 21st century.

In this Congress my subcommittee has championed key legislations regarding VA's apprenticeship programs. My bill, H.R. 982, the Warriors Workforce Act, would increase the monthly housing allowance that a veteran pursuing an apprenticeship or on-the-job training receives during a 6-to 12-month from 80 to 90 percent. Additionally, Representative Barrett led a bill that passed the

House, H.R. 3055, the Transitioning Retiring and New Service Members to Port Ocean Rail and Truck (TRANSPORT) Jobs Act, which would connect military veterans with supply chain employment while helping veterans secure careers that put their skills and expertise to use. My friend from Arizona, Representative Ciscomani, has an important bill, H.R. 1458, that would expand GI Bill opportunities to get veterans into mechanical fields. Even Ranking Member Pappas, Chris, right here, has a bill which I am co-sponsoring, H.R. 2954, the Veterans', excuse me, Transition to Trucking Act, which will allow VA to access as a State approving agent for apprenticeship programs in more than one State to receive VA approval. It is an outstanding bill, Chris.

Clearly this goal of getting veterans at the forefront of critical positions in American economy is a nonpartisan issue.

I would now like to yield to Ranking Member Pappas for his opening remarks.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHRIS PAPPAS, RANKING MEMBER

Mr. PAPPAS. Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Thanks for the bipartisan spirit there as you highlighted some important initiatives on the legislative front. I am really glad to be here for this important hearing.

Before I begin, I want to just state that I am disappointed that DOL-VETS will not be joining this hearing and we will not be hearing their testimony today. I am glad to have VA with us.

There is an important issue that I wanted to address at the outset here, and that is the issue of Chapter 35 benefits. I think it is important to hear from VA about the fact that 75,000 survivors and dependents using Chapter 35 benefits have seen delays over the last many months. Veteran survivors and dependents across the country who rely on these benefits for housing, education, or anything else have been left in limbo with no acknowledgement of the issue or any indication from VA when the problem will be resolved.

Now, we have got a hearing in a few weeks on this topic, but I was just discussing this with the chairman in advance of this hearing. I am hopeful to hear more from Mr. Smith today that he can communicate an update in terms of what is going on, not just for us here in the room, but for the veterans, families, and survivors at home that have been waiting for their benefits for far too long. I am respectfully requesting this because we are at the end of the semester, 4 months in, beneficiaries have not been able to receive payments and cannot wait another 2 weeks to find out what is happening and what the status is. It is just unacceptable that VA has failed to communicate when answers are needed today.

We have been hearing from this in our office. To put a human face on this, I have a disabled veteran from Laconia, New Hampshire, who reached out to our office because his son's benefits were delayed a couple months at that point in time. Chapter 35 beneficiaries, they need to budget, they need to sign leases, pay for textbooks and food, and they need answers. At the hearing in 2 weeks, I expect VA to send a prepared witness to directly respond to these challenges and to talk about the substantive specific information that can help us understand this situation. The witness should be a political appointee that will not pass the buck.

With tens of thousands of Americans lives impacted by VA's error, it is absolutely unacceptable that not a single VA official has bothered to respond to letters that have been sent by Ranking Member Takano, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and myself to the Department. It is unacceptable that the Department canceled a briefing on this topic on October 1st. I know that one will be conducted later, that it was over 2 months from when this was originally requested. It is almost unbelievable that we found out that the impacted beneficiaries grew from 750 people to over 75,000 through the press. There was no communication from the Department to the committee about this.

This is not a partisan issue. We all have student veterans and survivors in our districts have waited months for any information. In that spirit, Mr. Chairman, I hope we can work together on this and focus on getting the answers that our constituents deserve.

Last, when we do convene a hearing on this, it is critical that we hear directly from student veterans themselves, from their families, from survivors to fully understand the impact on this failure on their lives.

Now to the topic at hand today, employment pathways for veterans. There is a variety of government programs designed to help veterans secure employment after their service, but we frequently hear from companies that navigating all the programs in the various agencies is confusing and it does not meet the needs of employers. It is clear to me that much more progress needs to be made to improve VA's, U.S. Department of Defense's (DOD), and DOL's systems so that more employers are willing to participate. When you compare the results for employment-focused programs like Skill Bridge with education-focused programs like Veterans Technology Education Courses (VET TEC), it is clear that involving employers early is key to placing veterans in jobs and careers.

Data shows that programs run directly by employers, trade groups, and unions, where veterans get on-the-job training, upskilling, and certifications, continue to result in successful job placements while companies save on recruiting and salary and the government saves on training costs. It is a win-win. This dynamic with the government paying a living stipend and employers paying for training is a perfect example of a public-private partnership that benefits everyone involved, most importantly the veteran.

That being said, we need to continue to ensure that these partnership opportunities are not limited to big business. Small and medium-sized companies must have the opportunity to participate, to train and hire veterans, which may be where trade groups and unions come in. Our small businesses and union partners strengthen communities and can provide veterans opportunities closer to home.

Today I would like to hear from our employer panel on their interactions with various DOD, VA, and DOL-VETS programs, their thoughts on if we should specialize different programs further, and what a single point of entry for employers would look like, and how we should advertise the benefits of participating in these programs to the rest of the business community and who should be responsible for that.

In closing, I just want to note one difference between the programs that we are talking about today and the GI Bill. Since its inception in 1944, the GI Bill's educational component has been about more than just going to school. It is a tool to help reintegrate servicemembers back into civil society after their service, to enmesh them back into their communities, and to build connections after being gone in service of their Nation. We must hold those 36 months of eligibility sacred, especially now that the benefit does not expire, thanks to the Forever GI Bill. We must resist the urge to water it down by using it to pay for other benefits.

If an employment program that we are talking about today drains a veteran's GI Bill benefit, we must absolutely ensure that, number one, it results in an actual gainful employment and that the start of a career is meaningful and not a dead end job. number two, that it protects veterans from bad actors who take advantage of them. Number three, that it fulfills Congress' original intent of the 1944 GI Bill by helping to reintegrate servicemembers through community building and substantive interaction.

Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. You are welcome, sir. Thank you, Ranking Member Pappas.

I will just be frank, as long as I am the chairman of the subcommittee and Mike Bost is the chair of the whole committee, the GI Bill will not be touched, nor will the VA Home Loan Guarantee program. It is interesting that you and I, I think, are responsible for the two most successful programs the U.S. Government has ever created. I am very proud to do that. I gotcha.

I will now introduce our witnesses. Our first witness is Mr. Kenneth Smith, executive director at Education Services, Veterans Benefit Administration at the Department of Veterans Affairs. Accompanying Mr. Smith is Ms. Chanel—it is Chantile?

Ms. STOVALL. Correct, sir, Chantile.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Chantile Stovall, acting executive director, Veterans Readiness and Employment Service, Veterans Benefits Administration at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

I would ask that the witnesses please stand and raise your right hand.

[Witnesses sworn.]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Very well. Thank you. You may sit. Let the record reflect that the witnesses have answered in the affirmative.

Mr. Smith, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to deliver your testimony on behalf of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

STATEMENT OF KENNETH SMITH

Mr. SMITH. Thank you. Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today to discuss how we can strengthen the veteran workforce. Joining me today is Chantile Stovall, acting executive director of Veterans Readiness and Employment. We are honored to speak with you about how VA is supporting veterans as they transition from military to civilian life, especially through vocational rehabilitation, noncollege degree training, and employment-focused programs.

Transition support begins early. The VA is committed to supporting every servicemember transitioning from the military to the civilian workforce as seamlessly as possible. Through our partnership with the Department of War, VA reaches approximately 200,000 servicemembers each year through the Transition Assistance Program. TAP helps servicemembers understand and access the full range of VA benefits including education, employment, and healthcare.

To further support transition, in 2019, Virginia launched the VA Solid Start (VASS) program. Solid Start calls all eligible veterans, regardless of their character of discharge, at three key stages during the first year after separation from active duty. These calls are unscripted and focus on connecting veterans to the right resources at the right time. Since its launch, VASS has successfully connected with nearly 75 percent of eligible veterans, and these veterans are more likely to use their other VA services critical to securing meaningful employment.

In addition to programs provided during service and transition, VA supports veterans toward their pathways to employment and career readiness, including the Veterans Readiness and Employment Program benefits focused on education and nongovernmental collaboration and support. Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) is the cornerstone of our employment support through individualized counseling, employment planning, and hands-on training for disabled veterans seeking to overcome service-connected disabilities and return to work. In Fiscal Year 2024 alone, VR&E conducted nearly 20,000 one-on-one briefings with transitioning servicemembers. The program also supports noncollege pathways, like apprenticeships, on-the-job training, and the non-paid Work Experience Program, helping veterans gain real-world skills in fields like trucking, plumbing, and contracting.

Personalized career planning and guidance (PCPG) counseling is available to discharging veterans and ensures that they make the most informed choice for their post military education and employment path. PCPG helps veterans weigh options for college, apprenticeships, certificate programs, on-the-job training, and other high demand sectors to maximize career outcomes and economic mobility.

Noncollege degree training is a growing priority and VA is ready to assist. President Trump issued Executive Orders 14278 and 14269 to optimize and target Federal programs and workforce development for high-paying skilled trades and maritime industries. In Fiscal Year 2024, over 17,000 post 9–11 GI Bill beneficiaries began vocational or technical training and nearly 1,800 entered on-the-job or apprenticeship programs. Benefits may be used for apprenticeships in OJT and high-paying skilled trades, including advanced manufacturing, welding automation, and industrial technology.

Additionally, VA reimburses for licensing and certification exams such as for commercial driving, home inspection, nursing assistance, and artificial intelligence. VA will continue to partner with Department of Labor and others to expand marketing to assist employers in recruiting veterans and ensure veterans are aware of the GI Bill opportunities, including apprenticeships and OJT programs.

In Fiscal Year 2026, the VA looks forward to the implementation of the new VET TEC program authorized by the Elizabeth Dole Act to connect veterans to high-tech training in fields like cybersecurity, data analytics, and cloud computing. During the pilot phase, over 16,000 veterans completed training and more than 8,000 secured meaningful employment within 6 months, earning an average starting salary of over \$65,000.

In closing, VA is committed to ensuring that every transitioning servicemember and veteran has access to the tools, training, and support they need to succeed in the civilian workforce, whether through college, vocational training, or direct employment pathways.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF KENNETH SMITH APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mr. Smith. The written statement of Mr. Smith will be entered into the hearing record.

We are now going to proceed with questioning, and I will remind our members that you will each have 5 minutes for your questions.

I now recognize Ranking Member Pappas for 5 minutes.

Mr. PAPPAS. Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Smith, if I could turn to you and just get at the challenges that I presented in my opening remarks that veterans are facing right now with respect to Chapter 35 of benefits for veterans and their survivors. Can you talk and give us an update on these Chapter 35 issues?

Back in August, we received information that this was an issue impacting about 750 individuals. Schools found out that that number was more like 75,000. Where does that number stand? Most importantly, when can these beneficiaries in districts like ours receive their overdue payments?

Mr. SMITH. Thank you for the question. We look forward to addressing Chapter 35 questions in detail at the upcoming hearing, as well as in our staff briefing this Friday. We have continued to make progress through the 42 days of the shutdown and the 13 business days since then, and we will have a full set of statistics for you at that hearing or on Friday.

Mr. PAPPAS. I am not asking for complete detail right now, but just some assurance that VA is working on this issue and making progress. We are talking about thousands and thousands of veterans and their family members that have been impacted by this. They deserve an answer today.

We have sent a couple letters on this topic, one dated October 3d to the Department, another dated November 13th. It has been crickets. We have not heard anything back, and veterans deserve an answer. Can you give them a little bit more of an assurance how VA is working to address this?

Mr. SMITH. You have my assurance that we have been working on it. Our field team of claims processors has been hard at work doing this through the shutdown. I apologize for the delays in these letters. It is my understanding that they are working their way through the VA concurrence process and will be released to you as soon as possible.

Mr. PAPPAS. Where does that number stand? How many folks are waiting right now?

Mr. SMITH. I cannot provide you an answer on that right now.

Mr. PAPPAS. Are you going to provide us with a briefing in advance of the hearing in 2 weeks that will give us a little bit more detail so that we can provide the oversight that veterans and their family members deserve?

Mr. SMITH. Yes, sir.

Mr. PAPPAS. Now, can you talk a little bit more about some of the other challenges the Department has faced? I am just wondering, in terms of the lapse of funding, who has made decisions with respect to furloughing employees during the shutdown? Is it your understanding that the White House's guidance during the lapse in appropriations was that employees supporting government-funded programs, including mandatory programs, were to be essential in working during the shutdown?

Mr. SMITH. Sir, our VA contingency plan was published on the website. I know decisions were made far above my level about furlough status, so I would have to take that back for the Department to respond to.

Mr. PAPPAS. Who made those decisions in terms of the programs we are talking about today?

Mr. SMITH. In terms of the overall VA posture, I cannot say, sir. I would have to get the Department's opinion on that.

Mr. PAPPAS. Well, we are going to need more detail there, too.

Ms. Stovall, if I can turn to you about VR&E. The American Legion statement for the record highlighted concerns with staffing numbers, and that is an ongoing challenge we have discussed in this subcommittee quite frequently. What is the current counselor to veteran ratio?

Ms. STOVALL. Currently the ratio is 1-to-200.

Mr. PAPPAS. Okay. How many counselor job openings do you have across the country? Can you just assess whether counselors are keeping up with that workload, knowing that that ratio is far above where the target is?

Ms. STOVALL. Yes, we have 1,310 positions allocated for our Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (VRC) VRSS, and we have currently 1,010 onboarded.

To the second part of your question, so we have implemented our national case assignment strategy to help with those high work—high caseloads at some of the stations that have lower capacity to complete some of that work. We are also implementing overtime for our VRCs on a voluntary basis. We are also implementing help teams to complete orientations to get veterans into entitlement decisions—see counselors for entitlement decisions more quickly.

Mr. PAPPAS. Yes. How have these issues impacted the veteran experience? What are their wait times like for VR&E?

Ms. STOVALL. The current overall wait time is 81 days. Prior to the shutdown, we were seeing a decline from 54 days down to 50 days, and now we are currently at 81 days. Again, we are using those help teams to help us make sure that we can get veterans seen in entitlement decisions and plans written so that they are able to start school in January.

Mr. PAPPAS. Well, thank you. I appreciate your attention to those matters.

I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The ranking member yields back.

The chair now recognizes Mr. Barrett from the great State of Michigan for 5 minutes.

Mr. BARRETT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to the panel. Thank you both for being here today. Mr. Chairman, thank you for the shout-out on the TRANSPORT Jobs Act. We are hopeful that that will help kind of bridge the gap between members leaving military service and finding employment in critical sectors of the economy where we certainly have a shortage taking place.

You know, this really struck a chord with me recently as we saw the tragic case out in California, where an illegal Commercial Driver's License (CDL) operator, illegal immigrant in the country, performed an illegal maneuver, led to, you know, to the fatalities of Americans that were here. To me, I am thinking about this, I am like, why are we operating a system where it is benefiting people operating illegally when we could be employing veterans who have trained and are qualified in these ways, but may not have the appropriate civilian licensing that is necessary? They have driven trucks, they have done supply chain jobs in their military capacity, but then they do not have the reciprocity with civilian licensing to get that appropriate job and opportunity back home.

One of the original reasons, the very first reason I was motivated to run for office a decade ago, I came home from the Army and I saw that a whole host of my battle buddies that I had served with were really struggling to find opportunities in Michigan at the time. We were leading the country. We were the second overall State in the Nation for veteran unemployment rate. This is back in, you know, the 2000, mid-2000, 2015 timeframe. Michigan was coming out of this great recession at the time, and we were hit predominantly hard in that effect. Veterans always seem to suffer the worst brunt of economic downturns. Having a robust ability for transitioning veterans to come home is really important because I think it really provides that stability, that purpose, and that fundamental dignity that comes with being someone who is transitioning back home and finding that next mission in life.

The work that we do on this committee is really important in that effort to really establish a framework for how we are going to welcome people back home and provide them that self-sufficient dignity that they deserve.

I had a few questions for you about some of the shifts that we have seen within the economy away from maybe some of the traditional 4-year degree programs and into other skilled trade or other skilled professions and things like that. I am curious if you can give us any insight why we have still seen an overwhelming preponderance of people going into the traditional 4-year degree fields and less inclined to go into the trade opportunities that may be a better fit for them based on their skills that they have acquired in the military.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you for the question, sir. I wish I had a good answer for you, but, honestly, we do not have a survey mechanism

to ask veterans why they choose the path that they choose. That would certainly be, you know, something that we—

Mr. BARRETT. Yes. Do you think it has anything to do with the reimbursement rates and what they can qualify for under a 4-year program versus a trade opportunity, the apprenticeship programs, and some of the just I guess, reimbursement and other value ability of some of these programs that are available to them?

Mr. SMITH. It could be. There are a number of instances where if you look at a 4-year—you know, what we pay for a 4-year college degree—

Mr. BARRETT. Yes.

Mr. SMITH [continuing]. the total package value would be much higher than for a noncollege degree or an apprenticeship program.

Mr. BARRETT. Okay. Then I know I actually was in Michigan a few weeks ago in my district and met with a man who runs this group, Workshops for Warriors. I think he has actually testified in front of this subcommittee last Congress. He told me that there is a cap. He runs a trade program, a skilled trade apprenticeship-type program that gives certification to veterans, things like that. I think he told me there is a cap for an institution of how many of their students can receive GI Bill and other veteran benefits. Is that true, that there is a limitation there for institutions?

Mr. SMITH. There is a statutory requirement for 85 percent. It is an 85–15 rule, up to 85 percent supportable through government programs.

Mr. BARRETT. Is there a waiver available for that or would that need to be provided in law?

Mr. SMITH. Yes. I am sorry, I said that backward, 85 percent nonfunded, 15 percent funded. We can give a waiver to allow someone to exceed 35 percent as well, so that that waiver opportunity is available.

Mr. BARRETT. Thank you. Appreciate it.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I will yield back with 10 seconds to go.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman yields.

The chair now recognizes Mr. Kennedy from the great State of New York.

Mr. KENNEDY. Thank you. Thank you all for being here, your testimony.

The GI Bill is a sacred promise that helps veterans pursue education, transition into civilian life, and provide for their families, including the survivors and children of those who have sacrificed everything. Our responsibility on this committee is to ensure that that promise remains strong.

A recent negotiated rule from the Department of Education on loan limits for certain advanced graduate degrees has raised serious concerns, especially for veterans pursuing fields like nursing, education, physical and occupational therapy, social work, and many other advanced degrees in healthcare, particularly, but not exclusively. These are students and veterans who rely on both GI benefits and Federal loans to cover the full cost of their programs.

We need answers about delays as well on Chapter 35 benefits for survivors and dependents. The VA has not responded to congressional inquiries and recent staffing cuts affecting payment processing is certainly troubling. These issues require immediate atten-

tion. The delay is beyond concerning. It is infuriating, quite frankly.

Mr. Smith, countless Americans, including future nurses, therapists, and other essential healthcare providers, are worried they may no longer be able to complete their graduate professional degree programs under the Department of Education's rule that restricts access to Federal loans for certain healthcare professions. Veterans relying on GI Bill benefits deserve immediate clarity. Is it your understanding that GI Bill coverage for professional degree programs like nursing, physical and occupational therapy, and others will remain entirely separate from and completely unaffected by the Department of Education's draft rule?

Mr. SMITH. Thank you for the question, sir. I am unaware of the details of the Department of Education's draft rule, but we do pay benefits up to the annual max amount set by Congress for private schools. For public schools, there is no limit. As well, the Yellow Ribbon program allows veterans to—and allows schools to match 50 percent to exceed that the max cap that is set each year.

Mr. KENNEDY. The rule that was passed in the Big Ugly Bill, it cuts the ability for a student in half to achieve their Federal loan need. My question is very simple. Will that impact our veterans who also rely on the GI Bill?

Mr. SMITH. We will continue to administer GI Bill payments just as we always have. I cannot imagine a deference to the Department of Education on that.

Mr. KENNEDY. Okay. You do not know the answer?

Mr. SMITH. I do not know.

Mr. KENNEDY. Okay. Well, unfortunately, that does not answer my question. Obviously, veterans, including those pursuing these advanced degrees in healthcare, need clear guidance and assurances. Many are still going to require Federal loans even after using their GI Bill benefits. If those loans are restricted under this rule, it is going to impede their ability to afford their education. Hence, they are not going to go into these healthcare roles where the need for nursing by 2033, we are told from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, we need to be hiring 200,000 nurses a year to achieve where we need to be. We are already behind the eight ball and we know our veterans make great nurses and healthcare practitioners across the board.

I am curious how the VA is assessing the impact on these VA benefits. You know, how are our returning veterans that are trying to go into these fields, how are they going to be impacted?

Mr. SMITH. The statute allows us to pay 36 months of benefits in the post—under the post 9–11 GI Bill program. We will continue to deliver benefits to include both tuition and fees, books and supplies, as well as the monthly housing allowance to all veterans who are in the program.

Mr. KENNEDY. I think this is essential that the VA consider moving forward is how to prevent veterans who have served our Nation from being denied access or being pushed out of the field that they would like to go into, especially with such a great need for healthcare practitioners in this country.

I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman yields.

The chair now recognizes Representative King-Hinds from the beautiful Northern Mariana Islands.

Ms. KING-HINDS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you to the witnesses for the opportunity to have a conversation this morning.

You know, jobs, right, we are here because we want to talk about how we get these vets employed. One of the things that I always hear back home that makes me laugh, but makes me kind of sad, is when I see certain vets, they are like, thank you for your service, but where is the service for my service? Right? I think there are gaps in terms of some of these programs that they are entitled to, that is not translating into them after leaving service to get into a career where some of these benefits that are currently provided for is not leading to that path.

I also sit in the Small Business Committee. One of the conversations that we had last week with some of the panelists is, you know, just the shortage of workers in certain industries, like manufacturing. Right? One of the panelists said something that really struck me, which was, you know, it is not—it should not be education for all, but careers for all. What we are seeing as a trend across the country is that there are all these jobs that are just very hard to fill because we do not have the skilled labor.

I am listening to the conversation that we are having about the GI Bill and, you know, Rep. Barrett's question with regards to the amount of benefits that are given for 4-year degree programs versus these technical trade schools types of programs that are available. Obviously, folks are going to be incentivized to pursue the 4-year route, right, if you are going to get more money.

How do we look at that gap and create an opportunity where trade school education has the same value as a 4-year degree within the system? It is an open-ended question to both of you.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you for the question. I think we are certainly willing to help Congress and we can meet with you as well as with employers and other stakeholders to have that conversation about the policy issues and how to resolve those through new statute.

Ms. KING-HINDS. Did you want to chime in, Ms. Stovall?

Ms. STOVALL. I would say in my short 4 months that I have been in this position, it has been rather exploratory. I do know that we have some areas where we can focus more on employment and that is one of the areas that I am looking to improve. Currently, we do have 96 percent of our participants that are following our employment through long-term services track and only about 2.5 percent that are in our rapid access track, which is the track that we use for veterans that have skills and may just need resume development and job development services to help them.

I am looking into that to see what is driving that high usage rate of our employment through long-term services track to see how we can improve and leverage participation of our other tracks that may be more appropriate. We do know that veterans come out of the military with multiple skill sets and so we need to figure out what we need to do to make sure that we are utilizing them and we are looking at how we can return them to the employment market.

Ms. KING-HINDS. Do you see some sort of perhaps an accrediting system as something that would be beneficial? That when, you

know, folks are in the military who already developed a certain skill, right, when they come out, some sort of an accrediting body can now take whatever that skill level is so that they are not now having to replicate the same training that they have already had and that they have already been doing, but could actually have physical paperwork to say I am qualified, I am certified, I have the credentials.

Ms. STOVALL. Thank you for the question. I do believe that it is, for VR&E, I think it is important for us to help them identify how they are able to sell themselves and when they are talking to employers.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentlelady's time has expired.

The chair now recognizes Mrs. Ramirez from the great State of Illinois.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Thank you, Chairman, and thank you, Ranking Member, for having us in this hearing today. I want to thank both of our witnesses who are joining us today.

It has been a couple months since this subcommittee met and a lot has happened in those 5 months. I want to go ahead and start, since I am not sure when we will have another committee hearing, to talk a little bit about the effects of the last 5 months. Really, I want to talk about the impact that the government shutdown had on veterans.

Mr. Smith, I want to go ahead and start with you. Mr. Smith, for the record, did the government shutdown negatively affect veterans? Yes or no?

Mr. SMITH. Yes.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Thank you. Yes. Just for the record, I appreciate you answering honestly here. 1.2 million veterans were at risk of losing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, as you know. More than 75,000 veterans and their family members had their tuition and housing payments delayed after the software problem stopped the automated delivery of their benefits. We also know that 56 VA Regional Benefit Offices were closed to the public, and more than 16,000 servicemembers preparing to leave the military were unable to receive the VA transition briefings.

Mr. Smith, recognizing that you saw the impact, did the government furlough any veteran employees at the VA? Yes or no?

Mr. SMITH. Did we furlough—

Ms. RAMIREZ. Did you furlough any veteran employees at the Veteran Affairs Department?

Mr. SMITH. I am sure we did.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Yes, you did. According to the VA press release, 37,000 VA employees were furloughed, and estimates that are about 120,000 veterans that work for the VA also were impacted. It is likely that many, many veterans were furloughed.

Mr. Smith, did the government shutdown have any negative impact on veterans trying to access educational benefits like the GI Bill hotline or the VR&E counseling case management? Yes or no?

Mr. SMITH. The education call center was closed during the shutdown.

Ms. RAMIREZ. It was impacted. Okay.

Just for the record, I just want to make sure we note this since we have not met for the last 5 months, and this shutdown by the majority really had an impact. I want to make sure I put this on the record. More than 900,000 veterans were unable to get assistance from the GI Bill hotline. More than 100,000 enrolled veterans did not get their Veteran Readiness and Employment program, counseling, or case management services. By October 30, there was a backlog of new applicants for the program of more than 61,988 applications. I want to make sure I put that on the record.

I also want to state that I was extremely frustrated that my staff were working around the clock every single day and they were unable to connect with the congressional liaison when they were attempting to advocate on behalf of the veterans that I represent. The Secretary directed leaders and staff within the VA to use congressionally appropriated funds to send these politically charged messages to veterans and congressional staff about the shutdown, which I think is a clear violation of the Hatch Act, instead of trying to work with us to try to help them. I want to make sure that I note this because the shutdown may have ended, but the impact is still there.

With that, the last minute and a half I have, I want to talk a little bit more about workforce opportunities here. Access to a quality education is one of the promises we made to veterans and we must deliver. The VET TEC is now drowning on GI Bill benefits, yet VA's own data shows that the VET TEC's employment rate is only at 49 percent within the 180 days of program completion.

Mr. Smith, when VA's own data shows that the VET TEC fails to leave to employment for more than half of participating veterans, is not restoring their GI Bill benefits essential so veterans are not stuck paying the price when their training fails to yield gainful employment?

Mr. SMITH. Thank you for the question. Based on the statute and design of the VET TEC program authorized by the Elizabeth Dole Act, if there is no remaining entitlement, the veteran is allowed to train without cost, so they are allowed to enroll and pursue the VET TEC program. Then they are charged entitlement if they do have remaining entitlement.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Yet half of the participating veterans are not getting their restored GI Bill benefits. I just want to make sure I note that because the purpose is to be able to help them get gainful employment. That is why, you know, I think some of us have been working the last few years.

I have 10 seconds left, Chairman. I worked on the Student Veteran Benefit Restoration Act and I am going to be reintroducing it. It will be really important for us to work bipartisan the way we did before to make sure this bill finally passes.

With that, I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentlelady yields back.

The chair now recognizes my great friend, Mr. Juan Ciscomani from the State of Arizona.

Mr. CISCOMANI. Thank you, sir. Thank you, Chairman. Thank you all for the witnesses here for being here as well to testify about this important topic.

You know, as our country continues to face shortages in key industries like electrical work, trucking, manufacturing, and energy, this committee must ensure that veterans are made aware of every pathway to a meaningful career. In a recent survey, more than 70 percent of Veteran Readiness Employment participants of the VR&E enter into an undergraduate program where about 3-1/2 percent entered into a vocational or technical program and participation rates on for on-the-job training remain especially low. Given the robust wages and impressive employment outcomes associated with these programs, it is clear that significant improvements in outreach are needed.

My bill, H.R. 1458, the Veteran Education and Technical Skills Opportunity Act, the Veterans Education and Technical Skills (VETS) Opportunity Act, expands access to vocational and technical training by extending educational benefits in the post 9-11 GI Bill to include both in-person and hybrid versions of skilled trade training programs in order to address skilled trade labor shortages. Today's hearing is an opportunity to learn how the VA is refocusing on all educational pathways, degrees and non-degrees, and the best ways we can assist veterans in obtaining high-paying jobs and strengthen the American workforce and the shortages associated with that.

I have got a—I want to start off with a question here regarding the Dole Act. Now, Mr. Smith, this is for you. The Dole Act was signed into law last January and it included improvements to the VET TEC program that is very key to the issues that we are talking about here. Now, the VA now it says that it is going to implement the VET TEC program into the first quarter of 2026. That is well over a year after this was signed into law. This is, quite frankly, unacceptable. I am not sure why it is taking so long, especially given that Congress paid for the provisions to this almost immediately.

I am also on the Appropriations Committee, so I know that well. We had the legislation and we had the appropriated funds for that as well. Why has it taken this long and why cannot we implement it today?

Mr. SMITH. Sir, thank you for the question. We have been working to build a payment or a claims processing and payment system to support the VET TEC program. Because of the changes to the underlying program, the requirements changed and we needed to make changes to our claims processing tool.

Second, our new payment processing system needs to be updated so that it can also process and pay those. We are looking to do that in third quarter of this year, be done in third quarter of this year, so that we can field that program.

Mr. CISCOMANI. Third quarter of this year?

Mr. SMITH. Yes, 2026.

Mr. CISCOMANI. Okay, next year then you are talking about.

Mr. SMITH. We are in Fiscal Year 2026. I am sorry.

Mr. CISCOMANI. Okay, Okay. On the fiscal year, gotcha.

Well, there has got to be a way to be able to speed this up. I mean, the funds are there. The legislation was passed. This has a direct impact on where we want to go here with workforce, especially when we talk about the traits and so on. I am hoping to

maybe get a little more concrete timeline or what is in the way of this. I do want to add some friendly pressure here because this is—time is of the essence here.

Again, it has been—it will be over a year by the time that, you know, your stated goal of quarter 1 gets implemented. Hopefully, we can get on that pretty quickly. I would appreciate an update on that when you have a more specific timeline.

Mr. SMITH. Will do.

Mr. CISCOMANI. Thank you. Now, let me move on to another question. I cannot see my time here, Mr. Chairman. One minute. Okay. Well, I do not have a lot of time, but so I will move to Ms. Stovall, if we can do that.

The VR&E meta data report highlights that, like I said, only 3–1/2 percent of veterans in the program pursue vocational or technical training and just about 0.4 percent participate in apprenticeships. What do you believe is driving such low participation in the career-building pathway, specifically on this one? What strategies can be implementing to increase awareness and enrollment in those programs?

Ms. STOVALL. That is one of the areas that I am looking into, sir, to determine, you know, what is driving the high participation rates in training programs. What I have tasked my staff with is looking at what are our top 4-year degree programs and how can we match those with apprenticeships and OJTs that currently exist that may be a better route to help our veterans enter employment more quickly?

Mr. CISCOMANI. I agree. Mr. Chairman, thank you. I would say that, you know, I think we, at least in Arizona or in Tucson, we may need not as many more attorneys, but we need more on the trades. We are missing that for sure. If we can—

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. CISCOMANI. No offense to any of the attorneys in the room here, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Not me.

Mr. CISCOMANI. No, I am not looking at you. I am looking past you.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay.

Mr. CISCOMANI. Okay.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. We are good. Mr. Kennedy? Maybe. I do not know. The gentleman's time has expired.

The chair now recognizes Mr. McGarvey from the great State of Kentucky.

Mr. MCGARVEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

This hearing is pretty simple. We want to make sure that our veterans, our men and women who put on the uniform, can build a good life and a good career after they transition away from the military. We know that there are some successful programs. The GI Bill has done a great job, but not all veterans need a 4-year degree. In fact, there are a lot of programs out there that can help, but the fact is veterans are not using these nondegree options.

We got to build some pathways. This is like, I hate using government speak. Let us not talk about pathways. Veterans need jobs and we got to make sure that they have what they need to get jobs. We have some things out there. Skill Bridge, these are registered

apprenticeships, union training programs, industry partnerships. We know how this can work. Our collective responsibility, both on this committee and at the VA is to make sure that our veterans are not burning through their benefits only to be left with nothing really to show for it at the end.

We need accountability. We got to have some clarity. We got to have some employer partnerships that deliver results for our veterans. We got to make sure that our veterans who have already shown the initiative to put on that uniform, to go into the service, can take the skills they have there and use them in the civilian world to get a good job and have a good life for their families.

I look at this statistic. I am going to follow up on what Mr. Ciscomani said a minute ago. Fewer than 20 percent of their veterans right now use the GI Bill for nondegree options. Only 20 percent. Your testimony today has stated this may be due to a lack of wider awareness. Not using government speak, let us talk about this in a real way. What percentage of our veterans do you think should be using their GI Bill for nondegree options? What is the VA doing to make sure they know about these options and where they exist?

Mr. SMITH. I will ask Ms. Stovall to respond in a second. First let me say I think there is an awareness problem. Both VA needs to be communicating with employers, partnering with employers to overcome that apprehension behind, you know, entering into a formal arrangement where they will be submitting enrollments and other documentation to VA.

Second, while we address this in PCPG, all of the pathways for education benefits, I think that we need to do a better job of other marketing around the idea of what opportunities are available for all of these different avenues.

You know, we are limited in some degree based on the statute. We deliver the benefit, we do not advise. That is where Ms. Stovall's team comes in, so I will ask her to add just a little bit to that.

Ms. STOVALL. Under VR&E, the way that the statute is written, a veteran is able to identify a vocational goal and based on that vocational goal would receive the training, whether that is a degree, diploma, or certification. They receive the training that is recognized for entry into that field. Based on comprehensive assessments, the VRC, or vocational rehabilitation counselor, will work with them to determine what the most appropriate goal would be to get them to suitable employment.

Mr. MCGARVEY. 20 percent right now are using the GI Bill for nondegree options. Do you think that number should be higher or lower?

Ms. STOVALL. I would defer that to Mr. Smith.

Mr. SMITH. I do not have an opinion. I do not know what the right number should be.

Mr. MCGARVEY. Okay, Okay. Right now, it says that VR&E employment outcomes are at 74 percent for program completers. We have learned that counselor shortages and long wait times are part of this problem. Right now, VR&E employment outcomes are at 74 percent. That needs to be higher. Right? We have heard about counselor shortages, long wait times. How are we fixing this prob-

lem to make sure that veterans do not have to wait months just to start?

Ms. STOVALL. Thank you for the question. We are looking at increasing—well, there is a couple things we are doing as far as our transformation efforts to make sure that we can render timely services. We have implemented a new case assignment system. We have—actually, I forgot to mention it earlier, but we do have 91 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) that we will be onboarding this month to help with our vacant—fill those vacancies. We are also continuing to use some of our help teams to assist with backlogs.

Mr. MCGARVEY. We are out of time. I have more thing. I do want to point out, Mr. Chairman, graduation rates look Okay, but only half of graduates land meaningful employment within 180 days. That is 6 months without a paycheck, so we got to do better.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Roger that. The gentleman yields back.

I now recognize myself for 5 minutes.

Part of this issue is back in the 1970's for some reason everybody thought that every single American needed to go to a 4-year college. They treated the rest of us that decided to join the military at 18 like we are less people, and that is not the case. The trades are where it is at. If you want to work with your hands, work with your hands because that is how America is built. America is not built because somebody has a degree in 13th century French poetry. It is because a dude went to one of these union shops and became a carpenter. Let us just remember that.

These numbers should be higher. The goal is employment. It is not a piece of paper on a wall. Let us always remember that.

A lot of these things I think, you know, my colleagues are concerned about. I am, too. I think we need to look at making sure that our TAP program addresses this more, that we educate our folks getting out of the military about the trades. Show them that, you know, you can make an exceptionally good living by being a tradesman.

I went, gee, it was last year, I was driving by, you know, doing doors and stuff when I was running for office, a year and a half ago, I guess. There was this dude there, he had this great house and this bitching boat and a truck and all this stuff. I stopped, I asked him what he did for a living. He said he is a lineman and his wife went to a tech school and she was an X-ray tech. You can live a very, very high-quality life by working with your hands. I just need to make sure that everybody understands that.

Mr. Smith, DOL-VETS is not here today, and we talked about that earlier. I think it is because of the intransigence of the Senate. We need to get those people in here. Can you tell me any redundancies between you and DOL-VETS? Between the Department of Veterans Affairs and the DOL-VETS.

Mr. SMITH. I do not believe there is any redundancy. We certainly partner with DOL-VETS and we leverage their registration process for apprenticeships and we then accept them. We deem them as approved.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Mr. Smith, you guys have similar workforce programs, homeless programs. There are a lot of redundancies and we see these all the time. Can you tell me all these processing things that we have going on, it just seems like it is taking a long

time. Do you guys use any type of innovative technologies to accelerate the process of registering? We have got a shortage of our counselors. What type of automated processes are in place to help speed along all of these functions?

Mr. SMITH. In education, we are very interested in automation. Right now we are automating more than 50 percent of our claims to speed benefits to people. Mostly—or benefits are actually delivered in less than 15 minutes. You can apply for a certificate of eligibility and, you know, in a matter of minutes know that you are eligible to use your benefits for any number of programs.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Then it takes, what, 81 days, ma'am, to get rolling? Is that right?

Ms. STOVALL. Eighty-one days in reference to?

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Did not you say it takes 81 days to get these things done for the Army?

Ms. STOVALL. The wait time.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The wait time.

Ms. STOVALL. The wait time. Correct.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. If it can be automated in 15 minutes, Mr. Smith, why does it take 81 days for completion?

Mr. SMITH. That is on the education side, to provide an entitlement determination for the GI Bill.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay.

Mr. SMITH. Vocational rehabilitation has a different process, you know, that requires some additional work on the front end.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Well, so I used VR&E, and I do not understand, I mean, you sit down and you fill out this battery of questions, then you talk to somebody. I do not know why that takes 81 days. I mean, I just—I simply do not understand that.

Ms. STOVALL. We have, with our new case management system, Readiness and Employment System, or RES, we have been able to automate the eligibility process.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Yes.

Ms. STOVALL. With that, that has reduced the wait time for a veteran to be seen by a case manager for an entitlement decision.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Yes, we have lower—we got a bill through the House that lowered the education requirement for these counselors; used to have a master's degree for this. I do not mean to disparage the folks that are doing this job, but it simply is not that complicated. More automation, more better. We just have to get over this institutional inertia that is the VA and focus on the veterans. I know that you guys are doing that pretty well.

With that, I yield back. We will—with that, I yield back, and we will be dismissing this panel. Thank you so much for your time. I appreciate it greatly. We will take a short break while we empanel the next question group.

[Recess.]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The committee will come to order.

On our second panel, we are going to hear from the following witnesses. Our first witness is Mr. Greg Hamm, vice president of field and government recruiting at Werner Enterprise, testifying on behalf of the American Trucking Associations (ATA). Our next witness is Gary LaBarbera, Jr. Where? There you are. Business agent, Teamsters Local 282, and Helmets to Hardhats trade advisor, testi-

fyng on behalf of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. I want to thank First Sergeant LaBarbera for his service. He just retired. First shirt, good job. Semper Fi. We just had our 250th birthday. Kind of a big deal. Hope you had a good time. Woke up with a headache, probably. Our third witness is Mr. Jerome A. Grant, chief executive officer (CEO) at Universal Technical Institute (UTI). Our fourth witness is from the great State of Wisconsin. Mr. Vang, it is wonderful to see you. Human resources manager at ORC Industries. I want to thank Mr. Vang for being here and representing my home State. It is great to see you, sir. Our final witness is Mr. Dave Bostic, service development manager, aftermarket and customer support for Region 4, testifying on behalf of Deere & Company.

I would like all the witnesses to stand and raise your right hand, please.

[Witnesses sworn.]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Very well. You may be seated. Let the record reflect that all witnesses have answered in the affirmative.

Mr. Hamm, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to deliver your testimony.

STATEMENT OF GREG HAMM

Mr. HAMM. Thank you. Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify on behalf of the American Trucking Associations and Werner Enterprises. My name is Greg Hamm. I am the vice president of field and government recruiting at Werner Enterprises. As a proud U.S. Army veteran, I understand, both personally and professionally, the challenges that come with transition into the civilian role.

The Army transformed my life by giving me the discipline to do things the right way, even when no one is watching, the grit to push through when things get hard, and the commitment to finish what I start, and a sense of honor that comes from being part of something bigger than myself. These are the same qualities that I see in veterans embarking on civilian careers. It is why I am devoted to helping find them opportunities in the trucking industry.

At Werner, we take pride in being one of the Nation's largest and most dedicated employers of veterans and military families. Our average driver earns over \$75,000 a year, and many earn well into the six figures. Approximately 20 percent, or 1 in 5, of our 13,000 associates are military-connected and our goal is to reach 25 percent, or 1 in 4. Our team of veteran recruiters has walked the same path as the men and women that we serve.

Veterans entering Werner can pursue careers ranging from professional drivers to technicians to safety roles, operations, logistics management. We extend educational support, tuition assistance, and military community resource groups to ensure that veterans and spouses have the tools they need to thrive.

Werner's holistic approach to career development has produced countless success stories. One example is Sergeant Eric Macedo, who served over 6 years in the Army as a mechanic. Despite his extensive experience maintaining complex equipment and leading soldiers, he struggled to translate his skills into the civilian career.

By using his GI Bill benefits to enroll in Werner's Registered Apprenticeship program, he earned a CDL, quickly advanced at our company, and today he serves as a road team captain and as a mentor. Eric frequently tells us that the structure and the community that he rediscovered at Werner restored his sense of purpose that he felt in the service.

Eric's story underscores what is possible when policymakers and employers work hand in hand. The Federal Government can help more veterans like Eric by increasing funding for the Commercial Motor Vehicle (CMV) Operator Safety Training Grant program, CMVOST, which will expand access to quality CDL programs; passing Chairman Van Orden's Warriors to Workforce Act to ease the housing burden on veterans undergoing job training; passing the Veterans Transition to Trucking Act to reduce the VA's red tape on apprenticeship programs; and passing the TRANSPORT Jobs Act to make it easier for veterans and their spouses to find jobs in the supply chain.

Each year, approximately 200,000 servicemembers separate from the U.S. armed forces. In trucking and across the country, the benefits of hiring veterans are clear: the work ethic, leadership, adaptability, teamwork, high moral standard and character, and the ability to operate under pressure. Veterans bring the values that make the workplace and the supply chain stronger. Hiring them is not charity. This is smart business.

Ranking Member Pappas and Chairman Van Orden demonstrated their commitment to expanding meaningful career pathways for those who have served by spearheading the passage of the Veteran Improvement Commercial Driver's License Act last year. I am confident that this subcommittee will build on that progress to empower veterans and their families and employers to broaden and broaden our economy in the months ahead.

I appreciate the opportunity to join you here today and I hope to contribute constructively to your efforts to strengthen America's veteran workforce. I look forward to answering your questions. Thank you very much.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF GREG HAMM APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman yields.

Mr. Hamm and Mr. Vang, I did not recognize your service, but you were in the Army so I am not supposed to. Just throwing that out there. Hey.

Sorry. That was for you for sure, for sure.

I now recognize Mr. LaBarbera, Jr., to deliver his opening statement.

STATEMENT OF GARY LABARBERA

Mr. LABARBERA. Thank you. Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on these critical issues. My name is Gary LaBarbera, Jr., and I currently serve as a business agent for Teamsters Local 282 in New York City as well as the Teamsters trade advisor to Helmets to Hardhats, working to create employment opportunities for veterans working as Teamsters in the building construction trades.

I retired from the Marine Corps Reserves in 2023 as a company first sergeant, Company A-125, following two deployments for Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and one for Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). My experience is also one of a successful transition from military service to civilian union employment.

Following my first deployment, I obtained my commercial driver's license and began driving a truck while serving in Reserve status. Following my second deployment, I began my career as a Teamster in Local 282, driving trucks in the heavy construction industry in New York City.

In total, The Teamsters represent 1.3 million members, including tens of thousands of veterans currently serving Reservists and military spouses, and we appreciate the subcommittee's attention to this issue. We appreciate the committee's longstanding bipartisan efforts to improve the lives of veterans and to ensure that when they transition they can access careers that allow them to take care of themselves and their families. It is my hope that from today's hearing that the takeaway I can leave you with is the role that the Teamsters have and continue to play in securing employment for veterans like me, thousands of current members and future transitioning veterans.

As I mentioned, I am the Teamsters representative to the Helmets to Hardhats program, which provides opportunities within registered apprenticeship programs and careers in the unionized building trades and has connected nearly 55,000 veterans to good paying careers since 2003, 13,000 of which over the past 5 years. We are able to achieve this through many partnerships with trade unions, employers, Department of Labor, and many others. I have worked with countless veterans connecting them to local training centers and employers, affording them opportunities to begin well paid careers as Teamsters in the construction industry.

I have also had many discussions with our locals and training centers who are committed to aiding our Nation's veterans and seek them out while looking to grow their workforce. I view this program to be a model of how labor can play an essential role in securing good jobs and careers for veterans.

The Teamsters' efforts in this area have been significant and wide-reaching. Over the years, our airline division membership realized that we were failing to transition military aircraft mechanics into civilian service. While we counted many veterans among the Teamster-represented pilots, we did not see this among the nearly 10,000 aircraft mechanics we represent, largely United Airlines. We led an effort to streamline the process in the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Reauthorization Bill, which the Federal Aviation Administration is currently working to complete. We thank Committee Chairman Bost for his leadership in securing that language.

Trucking has long been a strong source of employment for veterans, but also an industry where opportunity presents itself to work with Congress. For example, we thank Subcommittee Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and other members of the committee for their leadership on the Veteran Improvement Commercial Driver License Act, which was signed into law last year and cut unnecessary red tape for CDL training.

Uniquely, Teamster Locals across the country also operate our own free or no cost CDL training programs which frequently work with transitioning veterans. Our programs graduate highly skilled drivers with pathways to stable and well-paid employment. The Teamsters are very interested in expanding our programs and searching for ways to do so in conjunction with Congress. For example, through a large expansion of the Department of Transportation's Commercial Motor Vehicle Operator Safety Training, CMVOST, Competitive Grant Program. Last year the program received less than \$4 million in total. By increasing the funding for this program substantially, Teamster Locals can secure these available funds to expand existing programs, increasing offerings, and open new programs where they currently do not exist.

I should also note that the program is a perfect fit for today's discussion. The law already creates preference for programs which serve veterans, a requirement we strongly support. We are prioritizing expansion of CMVOST in ongoing surface transportation reauthorization discussions and hope for your support as negotiations on that bill continue.

Finally, we know that members of this subcommittee and the full committee have put forth numerous proposals on veteran employment and will continue to do so. The Teamsters are fully committed to working with all members on this shared goal and it is our hope we can both work with you on advancing those priorities and that in shaping proposals, programs, and new initiatives that you consider the ability of the Teamsters to be a partner in those efforts. We are proud to represent the greatest range of industries and occupations of any labor organization in this country and have a demonstrated track record of commitment to our Nation's veterans.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today and look forward to any questions you may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF GARY LABARBERA APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, First Sergeant. Both your and Mr. Hamm's record—or, excuse me, written testimony will be entered into the hearing record.

The chair now recognizes Mr. Grant for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF JEROME GRANT

Mr. GRANT. Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. It is an honor to speak with you about something that is core to our work and essential to our Nation's future: creating strong, reliable, high-wage career pathways for America's veterans.

My name is Jerome Grant and I serve as CEO of Universal Technical Institute, which includes UTI and Concord Career Colleges. Across our 32 campuses we focus entirely on hands-on, career-focused education in fields that keep this country running: automotive, diesel technology, aviation, welding, electrical, and energy trades. On the Concord side, nursing, dental professions, respiratory therapy, surgical technology, and other critical healthcare fields.

Last year we educated more than 3,300 veterans and military affiliated students. Veterans are not a subset of our population. They are central to our mission. They bring discipline, maturity, problem solving, and leadership that elevate every classroom they are in. At UTI and Concord, we have built a support system around them: dedicated admissions, financial aid, counselors trained on VA benefits, military scholarships, salute to service tuition reductions, career coaching, and veteran recognition ceremonies.

Our measure of success is straightforward. Four out of five of UTI's graduates are employed in their field of study within a year. Our success is measured across the full employment cycle. We support graduates for life with placement assistance and continuing education that is complementary because, much like the military, they carry our name long after they leave ranks. With new campuses opening, this impact will continue to grow.

One of the most powerful examples of what works is our partnership with the Department of Defense through Skill Bridge. UTI operates three on-base programs at Fort Bliss, Fort Bragg, and Camp Pendleton. Out of the more than 3,500 Skill Bridge organizations nationwide, fewer than 200 operate on bases.

Our Skill Bridge programs offer free on-base housing for servicemembers, guardsmen, and revision reservists coming from other installations. It also is open to dependents because we support the whole military family, not just the servicemember. We are honored to be among them. We hope to see the base commands embrace these important transition opportunities for servicemembers.

These programs cost the servicemembers nothing. Over just 12 to 16 weeks, participants complete automotive and diesel technician training that leads to civilian jobs with starting wages above \$50,000. There is no gap between leaving the military and entering the workforce. It is immediate with life-changing impact and we should be doing more of it.

We also work closely with the United Service Organizations (USO) and U.S. Chamber of Commerce Hiring Our Heroes program to deliver transition workshops, career preparation, and direct connections to employers. In every industry we serve, whether it is the skilled trades or healthcare, the message from employers is the same: we need more talent. Veterans are an ideal fit for these skilled collared careers that value discipline, teamwork, and technical ability.

We are proud to be recognized as a military-friendly school and veterans-friendly institution. What really matters is not the designation, it is outcomes. Our responsibility is ensuring veterans leave us with strong credentials and even stronger careers.

As for the opportunity to create more visibility into high-paying jobs and skilled trades, I could not agree more with what Jim Farley, the CEO of Ford, said just a couple weeks ago. The skill gap in the United States is no longer a distant warning. It is a present day crisis.

When companies like Ford have 5,000 high-wage technical jobs sitting unfilled it tells us one thing: our country must dramatically expand the training pipeline for skilled technical careers that keep America moving. Veterans are often well-suited for these skilled trade jobs.

At Universal Technical Institute and Concord Career Colleges, we are focused every day on solving this problem. Across our nationwide campuses, UTI trains students in automotive, diesel, Electric Vehicle (EV), hybrid systems, welding, aviation maintenance, electrical, and energy technology, the very roles Ford and the entire transportation and mobility sectors urgently need.

As part of UTI's success is our industry-leading partnerships and manufacturers allow us to offer both industry and company-specific training sought by our employers. We have manufacturer-specific advanced training programs with Ford, General Motors, Daimler Trucks, Cummins Engines, and several other incredible manufacturers.

We are eager to expand these partnerships with leading manufacturers to meet the needs of the moment. That includes scaling EV and next generation propulsion training, creating more Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEM) aligned curriculum and growing career pathways, opening additional on-base programs, and working together to recruit more veterans, career changers, and young adults to these skilled collared careers.

America cannot remain competitive without a strong technical workforce. UTI is ready to grow, innovate and partner—

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF JEROME GRANT APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentlemen's time has expired. Sir, your written testimony will be entered into the record.

The chair now recognizes Mr. Bostic for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF DAVID BOSTIC

Mr. BOSTIC. Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is David Bostic and I am here on behalf of John Deere to share information about an issue that affects thousands of transition servicemembers every year, which is the successful reintegration into the civilian workforce.

As you know, our Nation's veterans bring unmatched skills and resilience to their communities. Yet despite these strengths, many face significant challenges transitioning from military service. This issue hits me close to home. In 1997, fresh out of high school, I started work as a technician at a John Deere dealership in Lexington, Illinois. Except for the years spent in college and in the Marine Corps, I have spent my career supporting John Deere customers, first with a wrench in my hand and then in every single corporate role I have held at John Deere for the past 18 years.

John Deere manufactures equipment and technology that enables our customers to produce the food, fiber, fuel, and infrastructure that supports a growing global population. To accomplish this, we employ over 30,000 employees across 16 U.S. states, including 250 employees in Chairman Van Orden's district. We do not do this alone. John Deere equipment is sold and serviced by a network of independently owned dealers, like United Ag and Turf and James R. Rosencrantz & Sons in Congressman Pappas' district. These are small businesses embedded in thousands of communities across the United States that employ an additional 50,000 people. Currently,

these dealerships face a critical shortage of skilled workers, especially equipment technicians.

John Deere has always been a staunch supporter of this country's military and its veterans. Over the past several years, we have taken greater strides to advocate and support for veterans. In 2019, a team of fellow veterans and I launched John Deere's military hiring program. It was designed to help connect dealers with technicians to close the skilled trades gap.

Our goal was simple. We were set out to follow three key principles. First, be simple to navigate for servicemembers and dealerships. My team and I take on as much of the logistical and paperwork workload as possible. Second, add value to the servicemember and their potential employer. To do this, we provide free training to the candidates. This helps sets them up for success and it helps translate the skills that they have gained in the military into terms civilian employers can understand. Last, we stay focused on positive outcomes. Our goal is not charity or good press. Our goal is the successful employment of our participants.

Since 2019, our dealers have hired approximately 800 veterans, including hosting over 300 Skill Bridge interns, which has become a cornerstone of our military hiring program. Today, I urge the subcommittee to consider stronger partnerships between the government and employers to manage transition programs like Skill Bridge.

Employers are on the front lines of the workforce development. We understand the skills needed, the gaps, and the potential that veterans can bring to their organizations. By involving employers directly, we can ensure programs are relevant and responsive to a rapidly changing labor market.

Here are three key recommendations. First, formalize employer advisory councils to help shape transition programs like Skill Bridge, ensuring alignment with industry needs. Second, expand incentives for small and midsize employers to hire veterans and participate in programs like Skill Bridge. At John Deere, we are able to leverage our size and infrastructure to help our independent dealers navigate this process. Many small businesses would benefit from a similar model. Third, create a centralized employer portal to streamline veterans' benefits, track outcomes, and share best practices across industries. Well-intentioned businesses often struggle to navigate the existing systems and connect with the right resources.

In closing, I ask for your leadership to create a future where the government, veterans, and employers have a clear path to create positive economic opportunities. It is often said that the best recruiting tool the military has is a servicemember that becomes a successful civilian.

Thank you for your time and commitment to those who have worn the uniform.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF DAVID BOSTIC APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman yields. Mr. Bostic, your written testimony will be entered into the record.

I am going to throw a little Semper Fi to you, too. Kilo Company, is that right?

Mr. BOSTIC. Yes, sir, Kilo 324.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. Al Anbar? Al Anbar?

Mr. BOSTIC. Yes, sir.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Garden spot, was not it? It was not at all. Yes.

The chair now recognizes Mr. Vang for 5 minutes. Before I say this, Mr. Vang, I have been to your facility and it is remarkable. What you guys do there is life-changing for so many people. It gets not just the veteran side. I am talking about some of the other folks that are there. They take tremendous pride in getting up and going to work. They are part of a community. They are supporting themselves and their family. I want to personally thank you for changing the lives of thousands of people. It is just remarkable.

With that, sir, I yield to you for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF YING VANG

Mr. VANG. Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on strengthening the veteran workforce through nontraditional career path in manufacturing. My name is Yang Vang. I am here on behalf of ORC Industries, a not-for-profit manufacturer dedicated to creating meaningful employment opportunities, especially for individual disabilities and for our veterans.

Across the country, manufacturers are facing a workforce shortage. National Association of Manufacturers estimates by 2030 up to 2.1 manufacturing positions will need to be filled. It is a readiness problem. It is an economic opportunity problem. For our veterans in particular, a missed chance to connect people who are ready to serve and work that truly matters.

One of the most overlooked part of the sector is cut-and-sew manufacturing. It is a highly specialized trade, but not unlike many fields, it does not require a 4-year degree. It does require training, discipline, precision, and the ability to show up every day to do the job right.

When a servicemember transitions out of the military, many of them are not looking for a traditional office job. They want to work. The work that they want is hands-on. They are used to being part of a team. They are motivated by mission and not a paycheck. They are exactly the conditions. These are the conditions, especially on a manufacturing floor: a shared mission, clear standards, and a culture where everyone's role matters.

Unfortunately, significant barriers keep many veterans from considering these paths. First, there is a awareness problem. When servicemembers go through transition counseling, manufacturing, especially cut-and-sew, is rarely presented as a high-value, long-term career. Many veterans simply do not know these jobs exist. We can change that. I urge Congress to ensure that career transitions explicitly include a pathway to manufacturing, including trades like cut-and-sew.

The Department of Labor register apprenticeship programs are powerful tools. We need to use it and we need to extend it. Provide additional training funding incentive for veterans in these role. These will increase the pipeline.

Second, there are constraints in the GI Bill that can be used. Many veterans need short-term, skill-focused training programs,

not 2 or 4 years in classroom. Right now it can be difficult to fully utilize the GI Bill. We need to condense training stackable credentials in trades like cut-and-sew manufacturing, expand eligibility, and flexibility.

Third, the cost of training falls entirely on the employer. For a not-for-profit manufacturer, like ORC, and many other small mid-sized businesses, the desire to hire and train veterans is there. The margins are tight. Every dollar invested in training has to be carefully weighted. Congress can help by derisking the investments, targeted training grants, tax cut, tax credit, dedicated funding for veterans-focused apprenticeship, and work experience program.

ORC's mission is to employ individuals with disability while strengthening America's manufacturing base, including creating opportunity for veterans. Our cut-and-sew lines produce critical defense textile product. Veterans working on these products can see a direct line between their work and the readiness of the next generation of servicemember.

At ORC, we receive—employees receive an onsite training regardless of their educational background. We do not require a 4-year degree. We require willingness to learn to work as a team to meet with high-quality standard. We promote from within.

In closing, I want to emphasize three key points. First, cut-and-sew manufacturing, skilled trade more broadly, offers scalable, non-traditional career path for veterans that do not require a 4-year degree, but do offer dignity, purpose, and advancement. Second, better awareness of traditional programs, more flexibility. Third, when we do this, we do not just help veterans. We strengthen America's manufacturing capability, our national readiness. We close critical work gaps, support domestic production of defense textile, and other strategic goods, and demonstrate that this country still values skilled trades as a vital part of our economy.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to expanding opportunity for those who serve.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF YING VANG APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman yields. Thank you, Mr. Vang. Your written testimony will be entered into the record.

For anybody that is wondering, in fact, everyone from the State of Wisconsin has the same tie. I know, right? It is kind of cool.

All right. We will now proceed to questioning.

The chair now recognizes Ranking Member Pappas for 5 minutes.

Mr. PAPPAS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to thank our panelists for their testimony today. I think it is all important for us to consider as we think about how we match up the skills and potential of our veterans who are being separated from service with the opportunities that are out there and the need in so many critical sectors of our economy. I appreciate the work that you are all doing and how you are bringing together education and labor and the private sector to help solve this problem and to help make sure our veterans have everything they need to thrive.

Mr. Bostic, if I can start with you. I want to thank you for what you have put on the table here today and talking a little bit more

about your military hiring program that you stood up. It sounds like you did it in a way that provided the best opportunity for veterans to have access to it. I thank you for the feedback that you have provided in terms of how we can improve things with respect to veteran employment. You talked about employer advisory councils to, you know, better reflect the feedback from the private sector; incentives for smaller employers to participate, which absolutely is something that Congress needs to focus on. It should not just be big business that is able to be able to navigate these programs and create opportunities for veterans, because we know most of our employers fall into the small business category.

I just want to see if I could get a little bit more detail from you on this central portal idea that you had. There are so many different programs out there with overlapping points of contact and employment coordinators with responsibilities that overlap with each other. Can you talk about the value in having this in one place and whether you think Congress needs to give better guidance to various departments to consolidate and delineate responsibilities and ensure that agencies are working together with the end goal of opening more doors to veterans?

Mr. BOSTIC. Certainly, and thank you for the question. Yes, absolutely. A centralized portal, some single point of communication that streamlines exactly what benefits a veteran qualifies for or what benefits an employer would qualify for would be extremely helpful. It kind of mirrors how I run the program. With our military hiring program we are the single point of contact for the veterans and the servicemembers that come to us as well as the dealers.

We do not get too heavily involved within the specific benefits. I am just the matchmaker between the veterans, servicemembers, and the dealerships. That process of having somebody that knows there is one phone call they can make, there is one email address they can send an email off to, or one website they can go to and get a single point of information is extremely helpful.

Mr. PAPPAS. Well, thanks very much for your feedback.

Mr. Hamm, if I can turn to you, thanks as well for talking a little bit about the career development focus that your company has had. I appreciate you relating some of the feedback from the American Trucking Association and talking about some of the legislation that we have considered and hopefully will consider soon to cut red tape and help more veterans secure employment in the trucking industry. I thank the ATA for supporting that legislation.

Has the ATA seen any impact on a bill that we already passed and was signed into law last year, the Veteran Improvement Commercial Driver's License Act? Do you have any recommendations on other steps Congress should be taking to pay close attention to this issue in terms of implementation?

Mr. HAMM. I thank the ranking member for his question. We have already seen impact across agencies, especially those that have multiple locations across multiple states. The old inability to have students access their GI Bill benefits just because you were in another State location of a corporation or an entity that had it already approved in another State was burdensome on the veterans trying to use their benefits. We have already seen, in just the short

year that it has been in effect, we have already seen progress in students having access to funding through their GI Bill benefits to get quality education at these quality training providers.

Mr. PAPPAS. Well, thanks for that feedback. That is important.

Mr. LaBarbera, if I can talk to you a little bit about CDL as well. You mentioned in your written testimony about the bad actors that are out there. Can you talk a little bit more about the impact that this has on the lives of student veterans and what we should be paying attention to make sure that there are some guardrails and that we are protecting, ultimately, veterans to be able to get access to the right programming so that they can get the skills they need to have good-paying jobs?

Mr. LABARBERA. Yes. Thank you. Anywhere where somebody can gain a few dollars, I feel there are people out there that will do that. There are all these programs where they will bring a veteran in, they will spit them out with a license, and then you are on your own. That is not what we do as the Teamsters and the programs that we work with is you come in with us, we train you, and then you go into a good career that has—sustaining for your family and medical benefits and to be able to provide for your family for your whole life.

Mr. PAPPAS. Thanks very much. I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman yields.

The chair now recognizes Mr. Ciscomani from Arizona.

Mr. CISCOMANI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Grant, welcome. Thanks for being here, sir.

You know, with Universal Technical Institute's headquarters and major campus being in Arizona, you connect firsthand with veterans that are looking for technical and vocational training programs. We talked a little bit about in the previous panel on the demand and the interest from veterans being way, way higher on the 4-year degree versus some of these vocational programs that, quite frankly, they are in a higher need, I was kidding around in the last panel, than any of the other maybe professions out there. More on the technical side, but yet we see 3-1/2 percent or so of the interest in that.

That is a challenge that I think we need to take as a society overall to say how do we promote that more, especially among our veterans that I think are eager to get in there. Most of the people that go to these programs graduate debt-free and they start making a good living, definitely more than what I was making with a bachelor's degree in political science right after college and with student loan debt as well.

What—so I am trying to get a gauge here. What policy or administrative barriers impede veterans from enrolling in technical programs like this? How can Congress help expand access to high-wage technical careers?

Mr. GRANT. Sure. What a great question. It is come up a couple of different times in the conversations here, so I am glad it is part of the conversation.

First of all, the VETS Opportunity Act, H.R. 1458, starts to address some of the barriers that currently stand in the way of people picking these sort of careers. I think the best way to think about it is from ford of a high level. You are coming out of the military

and you want to access your GI Bill. You can either go to a 4-year school or you could go to a technical school. Not every technical school and not every program in every technical school and not every technical school that has hybrid or online programs. Which one sounds easier for you to make a decision?

Mr. CISCOMANI. Yes. No, I agree. Can you tell me why that is?

Mr. GRANT. Well, because it is the way the statutes are written.

Mr. CISCOMANI. The statutes are written that only certain technical programs apply?

Mr. GRANT. To certain ways and certain accredited institutions can go or you could go to every 4-year school. When you are coming out and you want to take advantage of the GI Bill because it is well-earned and you are going to be a great person out there in the world, there is just a lot of having to think it through that happens when you are thinking about taking—

Mr. CISCOMANI. It almost feels like the system is guiding our veterans or anyone to go into that 4-year degree route versus anything else. It almost seems like discouraging to go a different route.

Mr. GRANT. Well, that gets to there is really two issues, that gets to the second issue, which is there is a very longstanding cultural bias—

Mr. CISCOMANI. Yes.

Mr. GRANT [continuing]. to go to 4-year schools. We have 153 career counselors on high school campuses. There are hundreds of high schools that will not allow our students—our career counselors on their campuses because they do not want their kids to go to technical schools. We need to continue to break that down and get more programs into the high schools, into the community colleges, and then cleanup some of the language that makes it easier for servicemembers.

Mr. CISCOMANI. I am all for that. I am running out of time. I cannot really see my time, but I feel that it is coming. 1:45. I am sitting in that one angle that you cannot see either clock here. It is not that my eyesight is that bad, I promise.

I want to continue this conversation with you. You know, we had a veteran, actually a plumber that came over to our house and when he was leaving and we looking at the invoice, I told my wife we are in the wrong business here. You know, this is a good-paying job and for our veterans, we love that this is happening and we need to encourage more people to get in there as well.

I will switch real quick with the time that I have left on CDL. Mr. Hamm, if I can ask you this. My dad who, you know, talk about the stigma and all this. My family, as I think some of you know this, immigrated from Mexico. When my parents were like, what do you want your son to be? Some careers were not what they would have preferred. Now looking back it is like, you know, it could have been, you know, for many people that perspective changing.

My dad had a CDL. He was a bus driver most of the time that we have been in this amazing Nation. The trucking industry reports a high need for commercial drivers, certified drivers, and highlights that 12.9 percent of veterans already hold the CDL. Right? I went one of the training sites and they focus heavily in recruiting veterans as well. Can you talk a little bit about that?

What can the VA do better here in supporting and training these programs and the GI Bill with the VR&E program?

Mr. HAMM. I cannot really speak specifically to the VR&E, but I can tell you that, you know, interest in our—in the supply chain, interest in commercial driver's license is not just a—you know, it is a security issue, it is a national security issue. This is an area that we have to spend money on, we have to focus on. I think you know, multiple people on the panel have talked about CMVOST and the appropriate nature in which we fund—

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman's time has expired.

The chair now recognizes Mrs. Ramirez from Illinois.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Thank you from the great State of Illinois. Thank you, Chairman. I want to thank all of you for being here with us today. Really appreciate the work that you do to ensure that our veterans are getting good-paying, living wage jobs so that they can retire with dignity.

Look, the work that we do in this committee is incredibly important and, frankly, it is our responsibility to ensure that we are safeguarding and protecting the full benefits our veterans earn and deserve. Access to quality education is one of those promises we have made to veterans and it is our job every single day to deliver for them.

However, in recent years student veterans have been targeted by bad actors, folks who are seeking to enrich themselves by exploiting veterans' GI Bill benefits. I find that unacceptable. I have been talking about it since I got here to Congress 3 years ago. Veterans should be able to choose an educational program that meets their needs while being confident that their choice is going to result in high-quality education that ultimately results in good paying jobs. When a student veteran is defrauded by bad faith actors, it is only the right to be able to have a recourse to restore their GI Bill benefits.

That is why almost 3 years ago I introduced the Student Veteran Benefits Restoration Act of 2025. The bill would ensure that veterans who have been victims of fraudulent practices by predatory institutions of higher education receive the educational benefits that they were entitled to so they could actually graduate and get the jobs that they deserve. We actually passed this bill out of the House with bipartisan support and with a lot of support from the chairman here last Congress.

I want to make sure that I, for the record, note that I am urging my colleagues to support the bill as a first step to protecting our veterans from this fraudulent behavior.

Now, I want to talk about 2017. Congress made a deliberate decision to exclude nondegree independent study programs from GI Bill eligibility due to the rampant fraud and exploitation in nondegree independent study programs.

Mr. Grant, I wanted to ask you a question. What do you think in your opinion has changed now to justify allowing nondegree independent study programs to use the GI Bill benefits when we know that they are still being exposed to the same risks that we saw back then? What has changed for you?

Mr. GRANT. Well, thank you for the opportunity to respond to that. Number one, I will not pretend to be the voice of an entire

educational industry. I can speak very highly for Universal Technical Institute and its outcomes.

I also would like to follow up on one of your other questions around the number of employed veterans that are out in the market after 6 months because your statistic is accurate, which gets to the notion of quality of education, but it is not complete. The reason is, is that because the military benefits are 36 months, many of our veterans, 3,300 we educated last year, go on and do another program. Once they graduate from one program, say it takes a year, they will go on and do another 6-month or 9-month program. They do not get credit for going to school for that other program.

Anyway, so we pride ourselves on their outcomes and the high degree of integrity around the industry alignment. We are very proud of what we put out in the market in terms of veteran graduates.

Ms. RAMIREZ. That is great. Let me ask you, I am really concerned about bad actors and veterans' education. I think you are as well and I know from the work that you do. I guess my question is like what are we doing to ensure that we are preventing these risks from continuing to happen?

Let me, I have a little bit of time so I just need to get to the next question.

Mr. GRANT. Sure.

Ms. RAMIREZ. If I can, I will come back to you.

Mr. GRANT. Sure.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Mr. Bostic, your company participated in the Skill Bridge, which has employment rates above 90 percent. Meanwhile, we are seeing the consequences of programs like VET TEC overpromising and undelivering. Mr. Bostic, what should the VA in Congress be looking for to distinguish high-quality training providers from those who offer training without real career opportunities at the end, where they end up having to go to other programs and other programs?

Mr. BOSTIC. That is a fantastic question. Thank you. I will allude to what is been mentioned several times in this testimony already is to track outcomes, especially in the skilled trades where we have such a deficit across all industries from transportation, manufacturing, repair, all of those. There is really no reason why a training institution or a company would not be able to put somebody through a training program and get them employed. For me, when looking at any program, and especially how I look at our own program and evaluate its success, is to look at, you know, how many veterans, how many servicemembers are we actually getting employed?

Ms. RAMIREZ. Let me ask one last question in 7 seconds. Do you believe restoring benefits to veterans who are defrauded would be beneficial for higher employment rates and veteran career progression?

Mr. BOSTIC. I believe so, it would, yes. Thank you.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentlelady's time has expired.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Thank you, and I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentlelady yields.

The chair now recognizes Representative King-Hinds from the Northern Mariana Islands.

Ms. KING-HINDS. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It is not too often where I sit in front of folks who have shared their successful transition from military life to civilian life and so I want to start with you, Mr. LaBarbera. Thank you for your service. Congratulations on your retirement.

You stated in your testimony that, you know, that journey has been successful for you. I just really want to hear more about it to better understand where the gaps are and how we can look at the system that we have in terms of policy to formulate some of these action plans.

Mr. LABARBERA. Sure. For my experience, I came out and I was fortunate enough to have an opportunity in my reserve status. I think that the big gap is education for the young servicemember that comes out. I know, you know, there is TAP in the services. There is a lot of different things that are out there, but there is so much information that comes out. From veterans that I talk to on a regular basis, what I see is they are just looking for opportunities on things to do and they are kind of, you know, I will use the analogy of throwing spaghetti at a wall and seeing what sticks sort of. I think just a little more education and a little more one-on-one time with them, maybe during that transition period on what is a viable option for them.

One thing that I have heard a lot today from everybody here is, you know, a skilled trade is really—you know, it is not something that people should be looking down on. It is a great career path, whether it be with the Teamsters or any other, in my opinion, organized union trade. That is something that people should be striving for.

Ms. KING-HINDS. Did you actively seek out the opportunities that you have now or was this something that was connected to you through some nonprofit that directly deals with the VA?

Mr. LABARBERA. No, I was not through any nonprofit. It was a simple referral process. Somebody said, would you like to, you know, come work here and drive a truck? I said, sure. Then after my second deployment, when I had returned home, I had the opportunity through referrals to join Local 282 and begin my excellent story.

Ms. KING-HINDS. Okay. Thank you for that.

My next question is to Mr. Bostic or Mr. Vang. You both spoke about incentivizing companies and I wanted to kind of further flesh out what that would look like in terms of policy, so.

Mr. VANG. I believe that, you know, it is really just opening up, you know, the door for veterans here, meaning that, you know, helping. You know, a lot of the costs, we as the employer take on that burden, especially with the training. For us at ORC, you know, I do have tuition reimbursement program for our employees, but the goal here is getting them trained, getting them in, taking them through the process. It costs a lot of money from my time, all of the management time, to the training time, to the employer's time, to the lead person time. Having incentive out there to help employers, especially when our budget is tight, would be beneficial to open that door.

Ms. KING-HINDS. What would that look like specifically?

Mr. VANG. I mean, average, if you really look at it, you know, cost of training is between 3-to \$5,000 per individual, an employee. You know, being able to take on that burden with subsidies coming in would really, really help us expand that door for all of our veterans.

Ms. KING-HINDS. Okay. I have about a minute left. Mr. Bostic, can you chime in on some of those suggestions that you stated during your testimony, specifically the incentive part?

Mr. BOSTIC. Yes, ma'am. The—I will echo what was said earlier with the biggest—one of the biggest upfront costs is training. Remarkably very similar dollar figures on the equipment technician side.

In addition to wages, the training is one of the largest upfront costs. We are able to discount, provide for free a lot of our internal training to servicemembers. I know the dealerships that have hired our servicemembers, they provide a lot of training up front as well. Several of our dealers will even sponsor veterans to go on to an accredited community college, an actual diesel tech program, and do not require the servicemembers to use their own GI Bill benefits to do so.

Ms. KING-HINDS. All right. Thank you for that. I yield my time.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentlelady yields.

The chair now recognizes Mr. McGarvey from the great State of Kentucky.

Mr. MCGARVEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. LaBarbera, I wanted to start with you today. You warned about predatory CDL programs targeting veterans. What safeguards should Congress put in place to make sure that GI Bill funds only—and supports high-quality training providers?

Mr. LABARBERA. I am not sure I have an exact recommendation of what safeguards could go in place, but I think really looking at them and if you look at, like I said before, something that leads into a career and not just a CDL program, I think, you know, focusing the time and resources on that, I think will be beneficial.

Mr. MCGARVEY. Thank you. Mr. Bostic, John Deere's Skill Bridge program has already shown how veterans can move straight into dealership careers where employers are directly involved. Building on that success, what should VA do to formalize employer advisory councils and make it easier for small businesses to take part in Skill Bridge?

Mr. BOSTIC. I do not have a good answer. It is—it is a—honestly, it is a complicated issue as far as getting the right people involved at the right time for the right purposes. Again, I do not have a ton of interaction with the VA benefits. As I said earlier, I connect them with dealers. It is just in my own personal experience at trade shows or career shows or events similar to this one, when you have employers together talking about the gaps that they need filled, best practices, and especially when they have the ear of legislatures in the same area, those sort of conversations foster a lot of change and a lot of growth. Anything along those same similar lines would be beneficial.

Mr. MCGARVEY. Thank you. I think, you know, what you all are saying is what we want as well, right? Veterans do not just need programs. Veterans need jobs. We got to make sure that programs,

even if they are well-intentioned programs up here, are actually leading to veterans getting jobs. We know that employer-focused pathways work. We know that short-term education programs need accountability. We know that there needs to be transparency from the VA, especially how they are implementing the Dole Act and Rudisill. You know, I want to make sure that transparency is there, accountability is there, and that when the rubber meets the road and our veterans who are motivated, who are skilled, are coming into civilian life, that we are able to help with that transition from the military to getting a good job, so they can take care of themselves, take care of their families, just as they took care of us when they have the uniform on.

Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman yields.

I now recognize myself for 5 minutes.

What has come up repeatedly is the education industrial complex. That is what that is. It has essentially turned into a racket. Let us be honest. We got these kids going to school. They get out with hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of debt and zero ability to be employed. That is just wrong and it has got to stop.

You know, I guess I could say I have a complicated relationship with higher education because, you know, we need to have these schools. You got to remember someone did go to a 4-year institution and then maybe for a couple extra years and they got a master's in electrical engineering, but then they handed the plans to a dude that went to your training program who did the wiring. There is room for everybody here. We just got to understand that when we are out of foot soldiers, you cannot win a war. That is who you guys are representing just to be super clear.

Mr. Bostic, you made a very profound statement. One of the best recruiting tools is a highly employed and happy veteran. I need you to talk to your folks and I appreciate that tremendously. I want to know your Touch to the Transition Assistance Program. When is the last time your people have been on a military base and speaking to folks that are Active Duty that are on their way out of the service?

Mr. BOSTIC. I make it a point to be to as many on-base career fairs as possible. We are a corporate sponsor of several organizations, like Recruit Military, Hiring Our Heroes, and 50 Strong, and participate in them. Every time that I am on a military base, I make it a point to go and talk to the Transition Assistance Office to make sure that they are aware of our program and our benefits.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. We got to—me and Chris got to make sure that you get there more often and that door is open for you.

Mr. Vang, have you guys ever been over to Fort McCoy or to Volk Field to talk to the folks that are separating?

Mr. VANG. Yes, actually, I am actually stationed right at Fort McCoy.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay.

Mr. VANG. I do work closely with the team there. Again, you know, especially in our manufacturing. It is actually really, really difficult. It is a skill set.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Yes.

Mr. VANG. Okay. It is tough.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. If you guys do not know, they make our white hats, which is kind of cool. The Dixie cup, that is what your brains call it, I know.

Mr. Grant, what is your Touch to TAP program?

Mr. GRANT. We have 26 employees who are former military that are on 26 bases around the country giving career counseling seminars on a regular basis.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. Let us make that 50.

Mr. GRANT. All right.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay? We got a lot of bases.

Mr. GRANT. I would also like to say I did not get the memo on the tie. I am from the great State of Wisconsin.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Where are you from in Wisconsin?

Mr. GRANT. I was born in Milwaukee, raised in Racine, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) graduate.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Oh, really? Okay. Well, let us get the memo out next time.

First Sergeant, what is your Touch to the TAP program?

Mr. LABARBERA. Our Touch is through the Helmets to Hardhats program, where there are regional managers that visit every site that is available to a member base anytime they are there. I think it is roughly 25,000 veterans they touch on a regular basis—

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay.

Mr. LABARBERA [continuing]. that contact Helmets to Hardhats seeking a career.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. Mr. Hamm.

Mr. HAMM. Thank you for the question. Yes, we are on the bases every single week. We have got a team of people that travel the country every single week and are attending the TAP program briefings and actively trying to recruit folks to come to our great industry.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. We got some of my fellows back there with those funny hats on. We got to make sure that you guys are connected to our Veterans Service Organizations (VSO), also. It is critically important. We need the American Legion, we need the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. (VFW), Disabled Vets. She is in the back corner hiding from DVA. We got to make sure that you guys are connected. As Mr. McGarvey said before he departed, it is about jobs.

We have an issue with the Skill Bridge program, and we are trying to make sure—I mean, we have paid for this thing, and we are kind of getting the Heisman once in a while from the Active-Duty component. We are going to start working with those cats, because if we are not filling those billets or if they are going to a certain pay grade, which they are, you know, that is not Okay. We will be working—I am also on the House Armed Services Committee. We bring this up because we got to get those people into these programs that we have because they are critically important.

With that, I am going to yield back.

I want to thank you all for coming to discuss veterans' employment. It is critically important, as I just said. It is clear that this is an invaluable program for our veterans and something—we need more guarantees for jobs for our veterans when they get out. I hope to continue working with Chris, my friend, and the rest of the com-

mittee to improve the administration of these approved apprenticeship programs and enhance them in private sector and nonprofit sector to continue to help future generations.

With that, I would like to yield Mr. Pappas for any comments you may have.

Mr. PAPPAS. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. Appreciate the witnesses all attending today and for your testimony. I know it takes a lot out of your day to be able to travel here, but we benefit from having your voice in this conversation.

We need to be able to track skill growth, income, and career building within the industry long term to truly see if these employment programs that we have been talking about today are successful for veterans. I took notice that almost all the written testimony contained references to TAP. Getting employment wrong, especially during a transition out of the military or between duty statuses for our National Guard and Reserve component servicemembers, put the veteran and their family at risk for negative outcomes like housing insecurity, food insecurity, substance abuse, and suicidal ideations. That is why we need to ensure that veterans are protected from scams and programs that waste their time. TAP was not the subject of this hearing, but it is a crucial piece of this discussion. I hope to see improvements on the program in the upcoming National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), including a TAP curriculum for spouses and families.

I was disappointed to read in the American Legion statement that the Department of Defense recently declined to meet with them on TAP, and I hope to continue rigorous oversight of that program with you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you very much for everyone's contributions and I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman yields.

I ask unanimous consent that all members may have 5 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous materials. Without objection, so ordered.

This hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:29 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

PREPARED STATEMENTS OF WITNESSES

Prepared Statement of Kenneth Smith

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss how we can strengthen the Veteran workforce. Accompanying me today is Chantile Stovall, Acting Executive Director, Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) Service.

As critical members of the workforce, empowering Veterans continuously proves to be a catalyst for revitalizing and driving America forward. Congress has authorized several training and education programs to accomplish this and ensure Veterans have impactful civilian careers.

Service Member Support

The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) provides support for transitioning Service members through an interagency effort led by the Department of War (DoW), Department of Labor, and the Small Business Administration, which is supported by VA and other Federal agencies. Every year, TAP prepares about 200,000 Service members to return to the civilian world. As part of the general 5-day TAP curriculum, there is a 1-day mandatory VA Benefits and Services course that covers many VA benefits and services available to Service members, their families, and caregivers. TAP serves as an important opportunity for introducing transitioning Service members to their education benefits, but it is only one touchpoint. As all Members on the Dais know, it takes several touches over a period and through a variety of media to commit this critical information to memory. Further, if a Veteran is not intending to use their education benefits immediately upon separation, they are less inclined to see the benefit of the information VA is providing through TAP.

Transition Support

Understanding these challenges, VA launched the VA Solid Start (VASS) Program in 2019 to make early, consistent, and caring contact with newly separated Veterans.¹ VASS requires VA staff to call all eligible Veterans at three key stages during their first year after separation from the armed forces. By doing this, VASS aims to increase the likelihood that recently separated Veterans will get connected to VA earlier and utilize VA benefits and services. VA also sends transitioning Service members comprehensive employment information through VA's early communications initiative which begins 1 year before separation.

Post Separation Support

Once a Veteran determines they wish to utilize their VA education benefits to upskill or improve their employability, VA has two pillar programs—VR&E and the GI Bill. For Veterans who are eligible for these programs, they can access supportive services with proven outcomes.

VR&E Engagement

VR&E services and assistance are delivered through five tracks of service. Four of the five tracks focus on employment and employment-related services with Service members and Veterans. Across all tracks, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors help Veterans and Service members develop a highly individualized plan, monitor their progress, and provide professional counseling and support. Service members and Veterans are also supported by Employment Coordinators whose role is to assist in direct job placement and sustainment.

¹On October 17, 2022, VASS was signed into law (<https://www.Congress.gov/117/plaws/publ205/PLAW-117publ205.pdf>), permanently authorizing VA to expand VASS with DoD coordination.

VR&E leverages programs such as the Non-Paid Work Experience which enable participants to bridge the experience gap by gaining training and practical job experience. VR&E also includes use of on-the-job training (OJT) and registered apprenticeships to expand employment opportunities for Veterans. Through these initiatives, VR&E supports Veterans in developing marketable skills and trades via non-college degree programs with hands-on training experiences that offer quick entry into the labor market. Occupational programs in this area include contracting specialists, truck drivers, plumbers, and many more.

Veterans who complete a program of rehabilitation show significantly better outcomes compared to those who stop participating, such as higher employment rates (74 percent vs. 40 percent) and greater income earnings (\$90,000 vs. \$60,000). Additionally, their reliance on supplemental programs decreased (35 percent vs. 58 percent).² In Fiscal Year 2025, VR&E exceeded its previous record with 10,527 employment outcomes out of 19,372 positive outcomes for Veterans exiting the program.

Utilizing Education Benefits

Separate from VR&E, VA's pathway for Veterans to develop skills to enter the workforce is the GI Bill, which allows for non-4-year programs including an array of vocational or technical training, including certificate programs, licensing and certification exams, and OJT and registered apprenticeship opportunities. During Fiscal Year 2025, 15,290 Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries began training at vocational/technical schools and 2,219 Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries began an OJT or apprenticeship program. During the same time period, 78,382 individuals began training in undergraduate or graduate degree programs under the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

GI Bill entitlement can also be used to cover the costs of licenses and certifications required for certain jobs following completion of these educational programs, even if the individual does not pass the test. During Fiscal Year 2025, 3,541 Veterans received GI Bill benefits for test reimbursement.

VA can also pay for new employee training in vocational fields through approved OJT and registered apprenticeship programs. Individuals who qualify receive a monthly payment for living expenses that varies based on the GI Bill program used. However, as demonstrated by the numbers above, fewer than 20 percent of Veterans this Fiscal Year have opted to use their GI bill benefit to pursue a non-degree option. VA recognizes that this is in part an awareness issue, and the agency will do more to ensure Veterans are informed of all the potential uses of the GI bill entitlement and explain how an apprenticeship can be a better option because it would equip individuals with the skills needed to more quickly secure employment.

The Importance of Partnerships

One area which continues to expand is our internal and external partnerships. This starts with VA identifying high-demand career pathways and partnering with organizations that can further the growth for the American workforce. In the past, VA partnered with the Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics to compile lists of high demand occupations for the implementation of the Veterans Retraining Assistance Program (VRAP) and the Veterans Rapid Retraining Assistance Program (VRRAP). VA will also continue to work with DOL-VETS to develop outreach and marketing to employers who may be able to expand their workforce through Veteran-focused recruitment. VA would seek to reduce employer apprehension of administrative burden by providing marketing tools for use in conjunction with their recruiting efforts and demonstrating current tools to manage benefits, thereby demonstrating how employers can support Veterans using Post 9/11 GI Bill apprenticeship and OJT benefits. One example is VA's partnership with private companies such as the International Business Machines Corporation (IBM) to scale the IBM SkillsBuild program access to certifications and training in high-demand industries. This free, credentialed online program gives veterans access to information technology (IT) skills and builds pathways to meet current technological demands in rapidly expanding fields like Data Analytics, Cybersecurity, Artificial Intelligence, and Cloud Computing. After successful completion, all participants earn IBM-branded digital certificates to certify their relevant skills in emerging technologies and related proficiencies to prepare them for successful careers in technology. Although participation in the IBM SkillsBuild program for Fiscal Year 2025 is still underway, we have already seen an increase in participants from 12,215 to 14,368 learners to date. Individuals can learn more about this program at <https://www.va.gov/education/other-va-education-benefits/ibm-skillsbuild-program/>.

² Fiscal Year 2023 Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) Longitudinal Study (<https://www.benefits.va.gov/VOCREHAB/docs/FY2023-longitudinal-study.pdf>)

Internally, VA partners with DoD to offer the Warrior Training Advancement Course (WARTAC), a national-level VBA training program for active-duty Service members seeking employment as VA claims processors. VA has successfully trained 2,893 transitioning Veterans through the WARTAC program since its inception in 2014, and most graduates remain employed with VA today, many of whom have transitioned into leadership positions within the organization.

Other key initiatives aimed at helping Veterans who face employment challenges are the Special Employer Incentives and Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET-TEC) programs, which provide job training and experience with little or no risk for employers. Through both of these programs, VA maintains partnerships with employers such as Amazon, Google, Microsoft, Department of Transportation, Social Security Administration, and many more.

Challenges and Opportunities

VA acknowledges the Nation's rapidly evolving labor market demands a nimble workforce, and Veterans are uniquely equipped to meet many of our employers' emerging needs. However, to achieve this and ensure Veterans are informed of all their education and training benefits, VA must reassess how we communicate.

Additionally, substantive changes enacted by Congress in its reauthorization of the VET TEC program are leading to considerable implementation delays, due to the need for multiple system and business process changes required to manage entitlement and payments. Given the defined opportunity window for VET TEC 2.0, with the program only being authorized until September 30, 2027, VA is looking at low-code solution options and expects to have a viable solution identified in Quarter 1, Fiscal Year 2026.

Despite the IT delays, VA has made forward progress with other VET TEC 2.0 requirements. For example, VA has revised the training provider and student applications, updated training provider and expert credentials checklists, and drafted training and communications documents.

Another area of concern is our limited engagement with transitioning Service members during TAP courses. The 2019 National Defense Authorization Act authorizes 1 day for VA to cover health care and benefits during the 1 week of TAP. Education, Personalized Career Planning and Guidance (PCPG), and VR&E are covered in the curriculum. But a single day, which amounts to 6 classroom hours after lunch and breaks, is a very condensed time period for Service members to receive such a large amount of information. We regularly revise our curriculum based on Service member feedback to regularly improve the Service member experience within the allotted time.

Conclusion

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, this concludes my statement. We would be happy to answer any questions you or other Members of the Subcommittee may have.

Prepared Statement of Greg Hamm



Statement of

Gregory H. Hamm
Vice President – Field and Government Recruiting
Werner Enterprises

on behalf of

The American Trucking Associations

Before the

Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
United States House of Representatives

Hearing on

“Strengthening the Workforce of Veterans in America”

December 2, 2025

Introduction

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the American Trucking Associations (ATA) and Werner Enterprises. My name is Greg Hamm, and I serve as the Vice President of Field and Government Recruiting at Werner, headquartered in Omaha, Nebraska. Having served six years in the U.S. Army and now working to help fellow veterans enter the trucking industry, I understand—both personally and professionally—the challenges that come with transitioning into civilian life.

Before I enlisted, I'll be the first to admit that I wasn't exactly on a path of discipline or purpose. I was an average college kid—coasting, unfocused, more interested in getting by than getting better. The Army changed all of that. It gave me the greatest gifts of my life: the discipline to do things the right way even when no one is watching; the grit to push through when things get hard; the commitment to finish what I start; and the sense of honor that comes from being part of something bigger than myself.

Those lessons didn't just redirect my life—they shaped the leader, husband, father, and professional I've become. They are the same qualities I see in so many veterans who are looking for a chance to bring those strengths into a civilian career. It is why I am deeply committed to helping them find opportunity in the trucking industry.

ATA is a 90-year-old federation and the nation's largest trade association representing the 8.4 million men and women working in trucking-related jobs, including 3.6 million professional drivers. As a 50-state federation representing 37,000 motor carriers and suppliers—from long-haul and LTL carriers to agriculture haulers, specialized carriers, and small one-truck operators—ATA serves as the unified voice of the trucking industry.

Werner itself is an American success story. Founded in 1956 with one driver, one truck, and one dream, we have grown into a company of more than 13,000 employees and nearly 10,000 trucks operating across the contiguous United States. Our average driver earns over \$75,000 annually, with many earning well above six figures—a strong wage for a strong, skills-based career.

The House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity plays a vital role in supporting employment, education, housing, and vocational rehabilitation programs that affect millions of veterans. As a veteran who cares deeply about the success of these programs, I thank you for your leadership. We share a commitment to expanding meaningful career pathways for those who have served, a mission that strengthens families, employers, and our broader economy.

Each year, approximately 200,000 service members separate from the U.S. Armed Forces. In trucking and across the country, the benefits of hiring veterans are clear: work ethic, leadership, adaptability, teamwork, strong ethics, and the ability to operate under pressure. Veterans bring the values that make workplaces—and supply chains—stronger. Hiring them is not charity; it is smart business.

I appreciate the opportunity to join you today, and I hope to contribute constructively to your efforts to strengthen the workforce of veterans in America.

Werner's Commitment to Veteran and Military Community Hiring

At Werner, we take pride in being one of the nation's largest and most committed employers of veterans and military families. Today, approximately 20% of our associates are military-connected, and our goal is to reach 25%. This commitment is supported by a dedicated team of veteran recruiters who have walked the same path as the men and women we serve. They understand the unique challenges of military transition and know how to translate military skills into meaningful civilian careers.

We provide support not just in hiring, but in career development. Veterans entering Werner can pursue pathways ranging from professional driving and maintenance to safety roles, operations, and logistics management. Our registered apprenticeship programs allow veterans to earn industry-recognized credentials while applying their GI Bill benefits to advance their learning. We extend educational support, tuition assistance, and military community resource groups to ensure veterans and spouses have the tools they need to thrive.

For example:

- **Military Skills Test Waiver:**

Eligible service members with experience operating military vehicles equivalent to commercial motor vehicles may earn a Class A CDL by completing only the written exam. This program meets all safety requirements while accelerating service members' paths to their first civilian paychecks.

- **WEVets Resource Group:**

An internal veteran resource group that supports career development, mentorship, and community service while fostering connection among military-connected associates.

- **Operation Freedom Fleet:**

A fleet driven exclusively by veteran associates, operating military-themed trucks that honor service while supporting recruiting and community events nationwide.

Because of these programs and a decades-long commitment to the military community, Werner is consistently recognized as a national leader. Most recently, Werner was again named a Military Friendly® Top Ten Employer and Military Spouse Friendly® Top Ten Employer—our fourth consecutive year. We have also received national honors from DAV, Vets Indexes, Apprenticeship USA, the American Legion, the Military Officers Association of America, and just recently, the Lee Anderson Veteran and Military Spouse Employment Award from Hiring Our Heroes and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Hiring veterans isn't just the right thing to do; it strengthens our workforce. Veterans excel because they are conditioned to overcome challenges, follow strict safety standards, and maintain the discipline required in a high-responsibility profession. When veterans find a home in our industry, our supply chain—and our country—benefits.

Success Stories: What Happens When Barriers Are Removed

Sergeant Eric Macedo

Eric served six and a half years in the U.S. Army as an all-wheel-vehicle mechanic. Despite his extensive experience maintaining complex equipment and leading soldiers, he struggled to translate his skills into a civilian career.

During annual training with the National Guard, he discovered the FMCSA Military Skills Test Waiver program. He contacted Werner and soon enrolled using his VA education benefits. Eric completed our registered apprenticeship program, earned his CDL, and quickly advanced—first as a professional driver, then as a member of our Operation Freedom Fleet, and today as a Road Team Captain and leader mentoring the next generation.

Eric frequently tells us that the purpose, structure, and community he rediscovered at Werner restored the sense of mission he felt in service. His story demonstrates what is possible when federal policy and employer commitment work hand in hand.

Ingo Hauptmann

Military spouses face some of the highest unemployment rates in the country—often five to seven times the national average—due to frequent relocations, licensing challenges, and career disruptions. Ingo is one of them.

After years of supporting his wife’s military career and navigating multiple PCS moves, Ingo struggled to establish stable employment. When his wife completed her final assignment, he enrolled in truck driving school and connected with Werner. Ingo learned he could utilize his spouse’s transferred VA education benefits to complete Werner’s apprenticeship program. He excelled—demonstrating advanced safety, navigation, productivity, and regulatory skills developed over years of managing household logistics through repeated relocations.

He is now nearing completion of his apprenticeship and will receive his national Department of Labor certification—ending a long cycle of instability and launching a scalable career.

Ingo’s story is proof that military spouses represent an untapped, high-value talent pool. Supporting them is both the right thing to do and a strategic workforce investment.

Strengthening Training Quality and Expanding Access to CDL Programs

Supporting veterans also means protecting the integrity of the profession they enter. High-quality CDL training is essential to safety, supply-chain reliability, and long-term career success. Werner has long supported ATA and the Commercial Vehicle Training Association (CVTA) in advocating for rigorous enforcement of national training standards.

We commend Congress, the U.S. Department of Transportation, and FMCSA for recent actions to strengthen oversight and protect the CDL system from fraud and abuse—particularly regarding non-domiciled CDL applicants and ensuring English Language Proficiency requirements are met. Safeguarding the CDL system safeguards veterans, employers, and the traveling public.

Beyond safety, cost remains a major barrier for Americans—especially veterans—seeking to enter the industry. Quality CDL programs typically cost between \$6,000 and \$8,000. While that may seem modest in Washington, D.C., for someone who is unemployed or underemployed, it is often an insurmountable barrier. That difference determines whether a veteran starts a \$60,000-a-year career or remains stuck in a minimum-wage job.

One federal program exists to help: the **Commercial Motor Vehicle Operator Safety Training (CMVOST) Grant Program**. But at just **\$3.5 million in FY25**, it is dramatically underfunded relative to its potential.

Increasing CMVOST funding to **\$100 million** and continuing its administration through FMCSA would:

- Expand access to reputable, safety-focused, CVTA-approved CDL programs
- Increase the number of veterans and spouses entering high-wage careers
- Strengthen the national supply chain
- Ensure taxpayer dollars support quality training providers
- Provide exceptional ROI

The return on investment is clear:

A one-time \$8,000 tuition grant helps create a worker who will earn \$60,000–\$80,000 annually and contribute approximately **\$800,000 in federal and state tax revenue** over a 30–40 year career.

Few federal workforce programs offer that level of impact.

Congress Should Enact Legislation to Strengthen Veteran Hiring in Trucking

Werner strongly supports bipartisan congressional efforts to enhance veteran hiring and streamline pathways into careers in the trucking industry.

Veteran Improvement Commercial Driver License Act of 2023

We commend the Committee for its leadership in passing this critical bill, which removes red tape preventing veterans from using their earned GI Bill benefits for commercial driver training. We are grateful to Ranking Member Pappas and Chairman Van Orden for championing this legislation.

Warriors to Workforce Act (H.R. 982)

This bill would increase the monthly housing allowance for veterans enrolled in workforce training programs—support that is essential in preventing veteran homelessness and enabling successful career transition. ATA and Werner applaud Chairman Van Orden for his leadership and support of this bill.

Veterans Transition to Trucking Act (H.R. 2954)

Currently, companies operating apprenticeship programs in multiple states must seek approval from each state individually—sometimes 20 or more. This bill would allow the VA to issue a single approval covering all state programs. It is a commonsense, bipartisan reform that accelerates veteran access to benefits and reduces administrative burdens. We thank Ranking Member Pappas for his leadership and encourage swift passage by the full House.

TRANSPORT Jobs Act (H.R. 3055)

This bill directs federal agencies to create a coordinated action plan to integrate veterans into the supply chain, identify regulatory barriers, and improve access to transportation careers. We appreciate Representative Barrett’s leadership and are encouraged that the House has already passed this bill.

Collectively, these proposals remove barriers, streamline access to benefits, and unlock high-wage opportunities for veterans, spouses, and transitioning service members. They strengthen not only veteran employment—but also America’s supply chain and national security.

Conclusion

I am grateful for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the American Trucking Associations, Werner Enterprises, my fellow veterans, and the 8.4 million men and women in trucking-related jobs who keep our economy moving.

The challenges faced by veterans and military families during their transition to civilian life are significant—but solvable. With thoughtful policy, coordinated leadership, and strong public-private partnerships, we can ensure every veteran has a clear, supported pathway into a rewarding career.

The trucking industry stands ready to work hand in hand with Congress and the Administration to honor our veterans, strengthen our workforce, and protect the integrity of the supply chain that keeps America moving.

Thank you again for your leadership and for your commitment to this vital mission. I look forward to your questions.

Prepared Statement of Gary LaBarbera

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on “Strengthening the Workforce of Veterans in America.”. The International Brotherhood of Teamsters represents 1.3 million hardworking people in the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico, in nearly every congressional district, including tens of thousands of veterans, currently serving reservists, and military spouses.

I currently serve as a Business Agent for Teamster Local 282 in New York City, as well as the Teamsters Trade Advisor to Helmets to Hardhats, working to create employment opportunities for Veterans working as Teamsters in the Building and Construction Trades. I retired from the Marine Corps Reserves in 2023, as Company First Sergeant, Company A, 1st Battalion, 25th Marine Regiment, following two deployments in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and one in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

My experience is also one of a successful transition from military service to civilian employment. Following my first deployment, I received my Commercial Drivers License and began driving a truck while serving in reserve status. Following my second deployment, I began my career as a Teamster in Local 282, driving trucks in the heavy construction industry in New York City.

The most important message I hope to leave the Subcommittee with is the value and the promise of a union contract and union career to our Nation’s veterans—and the ability and dedication of the Teamsters union to secure such a career.

Not only do I come from a union household, but the strong wages, working conditions, and opportunities provided by union jobs, and union training programs have provided real careers for hundreds of thousands of my brothers and sisters leaving the Armed Services.

The Teamsters have long been heavily engaged in these efforts – both creating and operating our own training programs, working in conjunction with other labor organizations, and advocating for common-sense legislative proposals in Congress.

Helmets to Hard Hats

The Teamsters have long been proud participants in Helmets to Hardhats (H2H), a national program that assists veterans, transitioning service members, and Guard and Reserve members in finding opportunities within registered apprenticeship programs and careers in the unionized building trades. Since 2003, H2H has connected nearly 55,000 veterans to good-paying, stable careers providing solid middle class lives for the families of the brave young men and women who served our country.

H2H collaborates with the 14 major building trades unions under North America’s Building Trades Unions, nearly 80,000 contractors nationwide, the Department of Labor Veterans’ Employment and Training Service, Hire Our Heroes, the National Guard Association of the United States, and the Army Reserve’s Public-Private Partnership. These partnerships ensure veterans aren’t just placed in jobs but launched into meaningful careers that value their discipline and leadership.

While working with Helmets to Hardhats, I have worked with countless veterans connecting them to locals, training centers, and employers, affording them opportunities to begin well paid careers as Teamsters in the construction industry. I have also had many discussions with our locals and training centers who are committed to aiding our Nation’s veterans and seek them out while looking to grow their workforce.

Commercial Drivers Licensure

Across the country, Teamsters local unions in 20 states have established training trusts or apprenticeship programs to train and certify our members and other workers as CDL drivers, as well as offering training in hazmat, passenger, school bus and doubles/triples endorsements—all at little or even no cost to students. Our programs graduate CDL holders who not only have the actual skills needed to be safe drivers but also obtain a pathway to employment, and we are proud to have trained many veterans through these programs.

Not only are these programs high-quality, but they serve as an important bulwark against predatory CDL programs persist across the country. As the Commercial Vehicle Training Association (CVTA) stated in a recent letter to Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy, “the continued presence of non-compliant entities on the TPR [training provider registry] allows these bad actors to offer substandard training services, resulting in students paying out-of-pocket for instruction that does not meet Federal standards. These students are often left unable to pass the CDL skills test, obtain employment, or operate safely; creating a significant risk to all who

share the road.” It benefits no one to generate “graduates” who can’t pass a skill tests or, if they can, are not able to operate safely.

Regrettably, these programs have been to know to target transitioning veterans, taking advantage of both their personal resources and resources available through the G.I bill. As discussed later, the pervasiveness of these programs necessitates both congressional interventions broadly, and specifically in support of high-quality programs like those offered by Teamsters locals.

Transition Assistance Program

The International Brotherhood of Teamsters includes 315 Local Unions throughout all 50 States, and represent a vast array of industries, we sometimes refer to as workers “from A to Z, Airline Pilots to Zookeepers”. Our nation-wide, multi-industry structure puts the Teamsters Union in a strong position to assist those who may be entering the workforce for the first time or re-entering the workforce after a long absence. Veterans have skills that are in demand and many military skills can be parlayed into family sustaining careers as Teamsters where a member will earn top wages, superior health insurance benefits for his/her family and secure retirement benefits.

Given the deep breadth of our membership and occupations, we believe that there are future opportunities for the Teamsters Union would to more closely partner with the Department of Defense Transition Assistance Program (DoDTAP) to assist returning service members with career assistance as they transition to civilian life, and commit to working with any member of the Committee in ensuring that participants in TAP have the opportunity to pursue the vast array of careers our members work in.

Congressional Priorities

The Teamsters have been deeply involved in numerous legislative efforts intended to strengthen veteran employment pipelines and career opportunities in Teamster represented industries. We believe that working in conjunction with your Committee, and other committees of jurisdiction, we can accomplish critical legislative changes to improve the pipeline and increase the availability of good jobs to veterans.

Aircraft Maintenance

The Teamsters are proud to represent approximately 10,000 aircraft mechanics, the majority of whom work for United Airlines. While it has long been the case that much of our commercial pilot workforce is made of veterans who flew military aircraft, the same is unfortunately not the case for individuals who performed military aircraft maintenance – in fact less than 10 percent of military aircraft mechanics are able to make the transition to civilian commercial service. In part, this gap existed because of failure of the Departments of Transportation, Defense, and Veteran’s Affairs to work cooperatively to address the needs of these workers as they transition out.

This includes failures to educate service members on resources which already exist, such as the Joint Service Aviation Maintenance Technician Certification Council (JSAMTCC) process, a pathway for military members to meet the requirements for an FAA Airframe & Powerplant (A&P) mechanic certificate based on their military training and experience. It also includes limitations in those programs, such as requiring separating services members to participate in duplicative testing or qualification which may be unnecessary.

To close this gap, the Teamsters led efforts during the FAA Reauthorization bill to create similar pathways that exist for pilots for mechanics, which ultimately included in the enacted legislation.¹ We thank particularly thank Committee Chairman Bost for his advocacy in ensuring the provision was included in the bill.

The provision requires FAA to create new regulation, including creating a written competency test for military mechanics to reduce testing burden and consider developing an Airman Certification Standard to qualify eligible military maintenance technicians for a civilian mechanic certificate. The Teamsters are pleased that the FAA has already tasked the Aviation Rulemaking Advisory Committee in developing these requirements, as well as identifying other actions that can be taken to streamline the FAA mechanic certification process for military applicants. We call on FAA to complete its tasking and these requirements expeditiously.

Supporting High-Quality CDL Training

¹Sec. 426. Military aviation maintenance technicians rule

While we are proud to run the CDL training programs discussed previously, our locals are limited in resources, which has constrained our ability to both operate new programs, and expand existing programs. To that end, we believe that Congress can play an important role in expanding access by increasing competitive grant opportunities for high-quality CDL training. Currently, Congress has funded driver training through the Commercial Motor Vehicle Operator Safety Training (CMVOST) grant program.

The program is small in scope—in 2024 it awarded a total of \$3.5 million to 27 awardees, and most awards are targeted at advanced safety training for previously licensed drivers.² As Congress debates surface transportation reauthorization, we strongly support an expansion of that program to include significantly higher funding levels, and a focus on initial licensure.

By doing so, Congress and the Department of Transportation can partner with the Teamsters and other quality operators to provide CDL training, including to veterans. CMVOST is also a particularly good fit for these efforts, as existing law requires that the “Secretary shall award priority to grant applications for programs to train former members of the armed force”³, a tasking we are prepared to meet.

Additionally, we have previously supported common-sense legislation which improves the pathway to careers as a commercial driver. The Teamsters were proud to endorse the Veteran Improvement Commercial Driver License Act, which was signed into law last year, and thank many members of the Committee, including Subcommittee Chairman Van Orden and Ranking Member Pappas for their sponsorship of the bill. In short, the legislation allows veterans to make use of G.I. funds at new CDL training schools, provided it is a new campus of an existing program, making use of the existing curriculum. This resolved a problem with G.I. bill restrictions for new facilities and we were pleased to see it become law.

Similarly, we have previously endorsed the Veterans’ Transition to Trucking Act, led by Ranking Member Pappas and Representative Kiggans, further cosponsored by Subcommittee Chairman Van Orden, which would allow the VA to streamline the approval of apprenticeship programs in the trucking industry.

In sum, we believe that trucking offers tremendous career opportunity for transitioning veterans, and hope to continue to work closely with this Subcommittee and Congress to assist veterans in finding careers in the industry.

Rail Benefits

It is also critical that existing statute does not create unnecessary barriers or deterrents for veterans to pursue particular careers. In the rail industry, workers receive unemployment and sickness benefits through the Federal Railroad Retirement Board. However, current Federal law excludes railroad workers who are also receiving military retirement pay from receiving rail unemployment or sickness benefits that they have otherwise earned. This exclusion harms veteran rail workers without logical cause and should be addressed – to that end we support the enactment of H.R. 10109, the Veteran Benefits Enhancement Act, led by Representative Stansbury.

Other Legislation

The Teamsters are also committed to working with Congress and this Subcommittee on legislation to improve pathways to employment for veterans which are not inherently specific to the transportation industry. We have previously endorsed both the Servicemember Apprenticeship Act and the College Opportunities for Servicemembers Act, led by Reps. Sherrill and Kiggans, which would expand access to Registered Apprenticeship programs that are available to servicemembers in the Skillbridge Program, and foster cooperation between colleges and the Department of Defense with regards to veterans’ entrance into Skillbridge programs, respectively.

We know that numerous members of this Subcommittee and the full Committee have also introduced various pieces of legislation on this important subject, and we welcome the opportunity to work closely with members on advancing proposals which will improve the veteran employment pipeline moving forward.

Conclusion

The Teamsters have been proud to work for decades at various initiative to ensure the men and women of the Armed Forces have opportunities for good careers, with strong wages and benefits which can support them and their families upon transitioning out of the service. We fundamentally believe that we, the Nation’s

² <https://ai.fmcsa.dot.gov/Grants/CMVOST.aspx>

³ 49 U.S. Code § 31103(c)

strongest labor union representing workers in nearly every industry, have a unique and critical role to play in this effort. It is our hope that we can continue to, and grow, our partnerships with Congress and the Federal Government in our effort to achieve these shared goals.

Prepared Statement of Jerome Grant

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and Members of the Subcommittee thank you for the opportunity to be here today. It's an honor to speak with you about something at the core of our work and essential to our Nation's future: creating strong, reliable, high-wage career pathways for America's veterans.

My name is Jerome Grant, and I serve as CEO of Universal Technical Institute, which includes both UTI and Concorde Career Colleges. Across our 30+ campuses, we focus entirely on hands-on, career-focused education in fields that keep this country running: automotive and diesel technology, aviation, welding, electrical and energy trades, and on the Concorde side—nursing, dental professions, respiratory therapy, surgical technology, and other critical healthcare roles.

Last year, we educated **more than 3,300 veterans and military-affiliated students**. Veterans are not a subset of our population—they are central to our mission. They bring discipline, maturity, problem-solving, and leadership that elevate every classroom they're in.

At UTI and Concorde, we've built a support system around them: dedicated admissions and financial-aid counselors trained on VA benefits, military scholarships, Salute to Service tuition reductions, career coaching, and veteran recognition ceremonies. Our measure of success is straightforward: **four out of five of our graduates are employed in their field of study within a year**. Our success is measured across the full employment cycle. We support graduates for life with placement assistance and continuing education, because—much like the military—they carry our name long after they leave our ranks. And, with new campuses opening, that impact will continue to grow.

One of the most powerful examples of what works is our partnership with the Department of Defense through **SkillBridge**. UTI operates three on-base programs—at Fort Bliss, Fort Bragg, and Camp Pendleton. Out of more than 3,500 SkillBridge organizations nationwide, fewer than 200 operate on base. Our SkillBridge programs offer free on-base housing for service members, Guardsmen, and Reservists coming from other installations. It's also open to dependents because we support the whole military family, not just the service member. We're honored to be among them. We hope to see base command embrace these important transition opportunities for service members.

These programs cost the service member nothing. Over just 12 to 16 weeks, participants complete automotive and diesel technician training that leads to civilian jobs with **starting wages at or above \$50,000**. There's no gap between leaving the military and entering the workforce. It is immediate, with life-changing impact. And we should be doing more of it.

We also work closely with the USO and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Hiring Our Heroes program to deliver transition workshops, career preparation, and direct connections to employers. In every industry we serve—whether it's the skilled trades or healthcare—the message from employers is the same: *We need more talent*. And veterans are an ideal fit for these “skilled—collar” careers that value discipline, teamwork, and technical ability.

We're proud to be recognized as a Military Friendly School and a Veteran Friendly Institution, but what truly matters is not the designation—it's the outcomes. Our responsibility is ensuring veterans leave us with strong credentials and stronger careers.

As for the opportunity to create more visibility into the high paying jobs in skilled trades, I could not agree more with what Jim Farley the CEO of Ford said a couple of weeks ago. The skills gap in the United States is no longer a distant warning—it is a present-day crisis. When companies like Ford have **5,000 high-wage technician jobs sitting unfilled**, it tells us one thing: our country must dramatically expand the training pipeline for skilled, technical careers that keep America moving and veterans are often well suited to these skilled trades jobs.

At Universal Technical Institute and Concorde Career Colleges, we are focused every day on solving this problem. Across our nationwide campuses, UTI trains students in automotive, diesel, EV and hybrid systems, welding, aviation maintenance,

electrical and energy technologies—the very roles Ford and the entire transportation and mobility sectors urgently need.

A part of UTI's success is our industry leading partnerships with manufacturers which allow us to offer both industry and company-specific training sought by our employers. We have manufacturer specific advanced training programs with Ford, General Motors, Daimler Trucks, Cummins Engines, and several other incredible manufacturers.

We are eager to expand our partnerships with leading manufacturers to meet this moment. That includes scaling EV and next-generation propulsion training, creating more OEM-aligned curriculum, growing career pathways, opening additional on-base programs, and working together to recruit more veterans, career-changers, and young adults into these skilled-collar careers.

America cannot remain competitive without a strong technical workforce. UTI is ready to grow, innovate, and partner even more aggressively to help close the skills gap and ensure employers have the talent they need to power the next century of American manufacturing.

That's why we strongly support the **VETS Opportunity Act**, H.R. 1458, led by Congressman Ciscomani and Congressman Davis with the support of Chairman Van Orden. This bill is simple, bipartisan, and urgently needed. It modernizes the GI Bill to allow veterans to use their benefits for accredited hybrid and flexible certificate and diploma programs—programs that match the realities of today's workforce.

This legislation would expand opportunities in fields where demand is high, wages are strong, and veterans thrive. It would reduce underemployment, strengthen our workforce, and allow more veterans to pursue careers in the skilled trades and healthcare—sectors where shortages are persistent and nationally significant.

At a moment when many white-collar entry-level markets are tightening, the skilled trades and healthcare fields are wide open. Veterans deserve to walk through those open doors. Passing the VETS Opportunity Act is one of the most important steps Congress can take to ensure veterans have access to the jobs of today and the careers of tomorrow.

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, Members of the Subcommittee—thank you for your leadership and for your commitment to helping every veteran transition into a meaningful, well-paid civilian career. At UTI and Concorde, we are privileged to serve those who have served, and we stand ready to work with you to expand opportunity and strengthen outcomes for America's veterans.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

Prepared Statement of David Bostic**Testimony of David Bostic****House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity**

Topic: Supporting Veteran Transitions Through SkillBridge and Dealership Careers

Introduction

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas and distinguished members of the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify to the Department of Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity. My name is David Bostic, and I'm writing on behalf of John Deere to share information about an issue that affects thousands of transitioning U.S. service members every year, which is the successful reintegration into the civilian workforce.

In 1997, fresh out of high school, I started as a technician at a John Deere dealership in Lexington, Illinois and attended the John Deere Technician training program at Lake Land College in Mattoon, Illinois. Except for the years spent furthering my college educations at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Illinois and serving as a Rifleman in U.S. Marine Corps, I've spent my career supporting John Deere customers, first with a wrench in my hand at a dealership, and then in corporate roles I've held at John Deere for the past 18 years.

John Deere manufactures equipment and technology that enables our customers to produce food, fiber, fuel, and infrastructure to support a growing global population. To accomplish this, we employ over 30,000 employees across 16 U.S. states, including 250 employees in Chairman Van Orden's district. But we don't do this alone. John Deere equipment is sold and serviced by a network of independently owned dealerships throughout the country, like United Ag & Turf and James R Rosencrantz & Sons in Congressman Pappas's district. These are small and mid-sized businesses embedded in thousands of communities across the United States that employ an additional 50,000 people. Currently, these dealerships face a critical shortage of skilled workers, especially equipment technicians. Right now there are thousands of open positions in John Deere dealership service and parts departments across the country. These are well-paid jobs with benefits and growth potential, and they don't require a four-year degree.

Our nation's veterans bring unmatched skills, discipline, leadership, and resilience to their local communities. They are problem-solvers, team-builders, and mission-driven professionals. Veterans consistently outperform the general population in employment metrics. According to the US Department of Labor, as of August 2025, the veteran unemployment rate stands at just 3.1%, compared to 4.2% for

Public

nonveterans. Post-9/11 veterans report an even lower rate of 3.0%. In total, 17.6 million veterans participate in the civilian labor force. Moreover, 32% of employed veterans work in STEM or skilled technical roles—double the rate of nonveterans—highlighting their readiness for high-demand careers. Veterans are also heavily represented in installation, maintenance, and repair fields (10.9%) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025). Yet despite these strengths, many face significant challenges transitioning from military service to civilian careers. On the surface these employment numbers are impressive, but what they fail to show is the stress, failed starts, and setbacks many transitioning service members face when entering the civilian workforce. As an example, I'd like to highlight Dave Underwood, Global Executive Recruitment & Governance Lead for John Deere. When Dave Underwood was medically discharged from the U.S. Marine Corps in 2012, he believed his discipline and leadership would make the transition seamless. It wasn't. He faced uncertainty, rejection, and moments of questioning his value outside the uniform. Fortunately, Dave was able to seek out mentors, learn new skills and leverage a network of mentors to help translate his military service into a successful civilian career by 2022. Other veterans are not as fortunate and this is why Dave co-founded the Quad Cities Veterans Network, a community-driven initiative that connects veterans with resources, mentors, and employers. These networks provide critical support during the transition process, offering job leads, peer guidance, and a sense of belonging. Their impact is tangible: veterans gain access to meaningful careers, companies tap into exceptional talent, and local communities benefit from the leadership and resilience veterans bring.

John Deere has always been a staunch supporter of this country's military and its veterans and over the past several years we've taken even greater strides to advocate and support veterans. In 2019, a team of fellow veterans and I launched The John Deere Military Hiring Program to help dealers close the skilled technician gap. Our goal was simple: connect transitioning service members with careers at John Deere dealerships. To accomplish this, we set out three key principles:

FIRST: Be simple to navigate for service members and dealerships. Deere dealerships are small to mid-size employers and often lack the assets to navigate many government programs. That is why my team and I take on as much of the work as possible. In not only recruiting but completing the logistical and documentation workload for SkillBridge internships.

SECOND: Add value for the service member and their potential employer. To do this we provide free training for candidates. This sets them up for success and translates the skills they've gained in the military to terms civilian employers will understand. This training is free of charge to the service member AND the dealer.

LASTLY: Stay focused on positive outcomes. Our goal isn't charity or good press. Our goal is successful employment for our participants. Since 2019, our dealers have hired approximately 800 veterans, including hosting over 300 SkillBridge interns which has become a cornerstone of our military hiring program.

Recommendations

I urge the Subcommittee to consider stronger partnerships between the Department of Veterans Affairs and private sector employers to design and manage transition programs like SkillBridge that assists veterans and spouses.

SkillBridge is aptly named because it serves as a bridge between military duty and civilian employment. And it works. Employers gain access to highly skilled talent, and service members gain a smoother, more confident transition. Each year, approximately 200,000 service members transition out of the military. SkillBridge participation exceeded 22,500 in FY2022, with nearly 8,000 opportunities offered through 4,800 industry partners as of mid-2024. Employers consistently report SkillBridge as a critical tool for addressing veteran underemployment and filling technical skill gaps (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2024) But we can accomplish more with a coordinated effort between the government and civilian employers. While Skillbridge has proven to be a successful program, it fails to address the concerns of veterans, reservists, members of the National Guard and spouses.

Employers are on the front lines of workforce development. They understand the skills needed, the gaps, and the potential that all military affiliated individuals bring to their organizations. By involving employers directly, we can ensure programs are relevant and responsive to current labor market demands.

Here are three key recommendations:

1. Formalize employer advisory councils within the VA to help shape transition programs, like Skillbridge, ensuring alignment with industry needs and emerging career fields.
2. Expand incentives for small and mid-sized employers to participate in programs like SkillBridge. At John Deere, we can leverage our size and infrastructure to help independent dealers navigate this process. Many small businesses do not have that kind of support and would benefit from wider adoption of third-party providers.
3. Create a centralized VA-employer portal to streamline veteran benefits, track outcomes, and share best practices across industries. Currently, there are numerous programs that can be overwhelming. Well-intentioned businesses struggle to navigate a plethora of systems and connect with the right information and resources.

Closing

In closing, I ask for your leadership to create a future where the government, veterans and employers have a clear path to create positive economic opportunities. This is not about one hiring program or initiative, it's about committing to a laser like focus on the dignity, purpose, and economic opportunity for our veterans. When they thrive in the workforce, families are strengthened, local economies grow, and our nation benefits from the continued service of those who've already given so much for our country.

Thank you for your time and commitment to those who've worn the uniform.

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Prepared Statement of Ying Vang

The Opportunity

- The manufacturing sector is currently experiencing a significant workforce shortage. According to the National Association of Manufacturers, an estimated 2.1 million manufacturing positions may remain unfilled by 2030.
- Cut & sew manufacturing represents a specialized trade that, while having considerable barriers to entry, offers comparatively lower obstacles for initiation; this field does not necessitate a 4-year degree, but instead relies on training, discipline, and precision—qualities inherent to many veterans.
- Veterans transitioning from military service frequently seek roles characterized by hands-on engagement, teamwork, and mission-oriented environments, attributes commonly found within manufacturing settings.

Why Veterans & Manufacturing Align

- **Transferable Skills:** Veterans bring attention to detail, proficiency with complex equipment, and the ability to follow procedures under pressure.
- **Non-Traditional Pathways:** Roles such as sewing, machine operation, quality assurance, and logistics can be acquired through practical experience, short-term training programs, or apprenticeships.
- **Career Progression:** Opportunities exist to advance from entry-level sewing positions to advanced technical operator roles, supervisory capacities, and ultimately plant leadership.

Barriers and Proposed Solutions

- **Barrier:** Lack of awareness of manufacturing (and especially cut & sew) as a high-value career path.

Solution: Expand and enhance career transition counseling to include pathways into manufacturing. Utilize and strengthen the Department of Labor Registered Apprenticeship Programs (RAPs) designed for veterans, and advocate for expanded funding incentives to encourage employers to hire veterans into apprenticeship roles.

- **Barrier:** GI Bill constraints regarding coverage for short-term, skills-focused training initiatives.

Solution: Expand eligibility and time for technical certifications and apprenticeships in cut & sew manufacturing. Streamline the conversion of military training into civilian licenses, such as transitioning medics to EMT or paramedic roles, leadership certifications to senior management, and engineers to construction project management certifications. Support the growth and extended eligible length of time with the Department of Defense's Credentialing Opportunities Online (COOL) program.

Maximize GI Bill benefits through an extended eligible period beyond 2 years, stackable credentials, and rapid upskilling modules. These alternatives offer efficient pathways to employment without requiring traditional degrees.

- **Barrier:** Training expenses are predominantly borne by employers.

Solution: Provide incentives to employers through training grants, tax credits, and funding targeted explicitly to veteran apprenticeship and work-experience programs.

Stories That Resonate/Case Study: ORC Industries

- **Mission:** Dedicated to employing individuals with disabilities while strengthening America's manufacturing base capabilities, including employment opportunities for veterans.
- **Cut & Sew Capabilities:** Manufactures key defense textile products such as Army tarps, Navy "Dixie Cup" caps, shelters, and more.
- **Career Pathways for Veterans:** Sewing/machine operators receive onsite training regardless of educational background. Supervisory, quality assurance, and other indirect roles are promoted internally, leveraging both training and leadership abilities. Advancement into management or technical fields is further supported through ORC's educational benefits.
- **Educational Support:** ORC provides \$3,000 annually in tuition reimbursement for technical or associate degrees and \$5,000 per year for bachelor's degrees.

Takeaway/Conclusion

- Cut & sew manufacturing presents a scalable, non-traditional career pathway for veterans. Enhanced recognition of skilled trades in the US, support for employer-driven training, and expanded funding for short-term credentials will empower veterans to obtain stable, well-compensated employment without the prerequisite of a 4-year degree, while simultaneously helping to address the Nation's critical manufacturing workforce deficit.

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD

Prepared Statement of International Union of Elevator Constructors (IUEC) and the National Elevator Industry Educational Program (NEIEP),

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and Members of the Subcommittee: Thank you for the opportunity to share the union skilled trades perspective on veteran apprenticeship programs and Post-9/11 GI Bill utilization. I am Jason Gray, a proud veteran and the National Chairman of the IUEC Veterans Assistance Program. We submit this statement on behalf of the International Union of Elevator Constructors (IUEC) and the National Elevator Industry Educational Program (NEIEP), in solidarity with other union apprenticeship programs.

We are concerned that although the Post-9/11 GI Bill was expanded in 2011 to cover apprenticeships and on-the-job training, these pathways remain underutilized by veterans. Based on DOL VETS data, in 2024, only 0.31 percent of Post-9/11 GI Bill participants enrolled in OJT/APP (On-The-Job/Apprenticeship) programs. These numbers have dropped substantially over the last 6 years: in 2024, 140,000 fewer apprentices utilized the GI Bill for OJT/APP programs than in 2019. This indicates that tens of thousands of veterans are missing out on valuable “earn-and-learn” career opportunities in the skilled trades.

We submit this statement of record to explain the issues and provide recommendations to improve veteran participation in skilled trades apprenticeships.

GI Bill Apprenticeships: A Largely Overlooked Opportunity

When Congress opened the Post-9/11 GI Bill to apprenticeships in 2011, it created a powerful tool for veterans. In a registered apprenticeship, veterans work as paid apprentices in industries such as construction, utilities, and manufacturing while simultaneously receiving GI Bill benefits, including tax-free money for books and supplies, and a monthly housing allowance during training. Unlike a traditional college path, the union apprenticeship model charges no tuition – training costs are covered by joint labor-management programs, meaning veterans incur **no student debt**. An apprentice earns wages from day one (with regular raises) and often receives collectively bargained benefits, such as healthcare and pensions. The GI Bill benefits essentially serve as a boost to help cover rent, utilities, childcare, and other living expenses for the veteran as they advance through a 3–5-year apprenticeship that leads to journeyman status, including journeyman wages and benefits.

In the elevator industry, the IUEC represents about 32,000 elevator and escalator mechanics and apprentices in the United States and Canada. The IUEC has collective bargaining agreements with 615 employers in the industry, including large corporations such as Otis, KONE, Schindler, and TK Elevator. NEIEP is the apprenticeship program run by a joint board of Trustees with equal representation from the union and employers. It provides a 5-year, state-of-the-art apprenticeship program in over 65 locations across the country, where apprentices “learn as they earn” from day one, while incurring no debt for their education. When apprentices graduate from the program and become elevator and escalator mechanics, they join a trade that has consistently ranked as the highest-paying blue-collar job in the United States. (Forbes.com). And other trades—from plumbers and pipefitters to electricians, ironworkers, cement masons, bricklayers, painters, and more—offer tens of thousands of similar opportunities.

Despite these advantages, veteran usage of GI Bill benefits for apprenticeships remains very low. The overwhelming majority of eligible veterans still choose to use their education benefits for college or other schooling. This gap is not due to a lack of ability or interest among veterans, but rather a lack of awareness and access. Many transitioning service members are simply not informed about apprenticeship opportunities during their transition or by VA educational counselors.

The GAO concluded in 2015 that VA needed to improve outreach and ease administrative hurdles for the OJT/apprenticeship benefit, and VA concurred with all the recommendations. Unfortunately, from our vantage point in the skilled trades, this outreach gap persists today—too few separating service members ever learn about

programs like ours. The result is a largely overlooked opportunity: veterans who could thrive in high-demand trade careers are missing the chance to use their hard-earned GI Bill benefits to pursue them. What's more, these industries are missing out on attracting qualified, skilled workers to fill a critical skilled labor shortage in construction.

The following recommendations outline how VA and Congress can collaborate to achieve these goals, generating positive economic impacts for veterans, employers, and communities alike.

Recommendation 1: Leverage Partnerships and Portals to Connect Veterans with Apprenticeship Opportunities

VA should strengthen and expand partnerships with industry-affiliated programs to improve awareness and access to skilled trades apprenticeships for transitioning service members and veterans.

One existing resource the VA can immediately leverage is Helmets to Hardhats (H2H). H2H is a national nonprofit portal that connects transitioning service members and veterans to registered apprenticeship programs in the construction and building trades. Backed by 15 major construction trade unions and contractor associations, H2H serves as a comprehensive navigator for veterans into these careers. Since 2003, H2H has helped close to **50,000 military members transition into civilian construction trades careers**. It aggregates over **82,000 contractors and 1,600 training centers** across 65 different crafts on a single platform, essentially offering a one-stop shop for veterans to explore trade opportunities nationwide. Through H2H, a veteran can learn about apprenticeships for electricians, plumbers, carpenters, ironworkers, and more, and be directly referred to local union apprenticeship training centers. Importantly, H2H also educates veterans on how to use their GI Bill stipends during apprenticeship to supplement their entry-level wages – helping them financially sustain the “earn while you learn” period. Given this proven track record, VA should formally collaborate with Helmets to Hardhats (and similar programs) to amplify its reach.

For example, VA can integrate H2H into the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) curriculum and VA websites, so every separating service member learns about this pipeline to the building and construction trades. The Department of Labor has already worked to include apprenticeship information in TAP classes; a coordinated VA endorsement would further validate this route.

Recommendation 2: Remove Barriers and Provide Incentives for Apprenticeship Program Participation

Oftentimes, the red tape surrounding approval of OJT/APP programs through State Approving Agencies (SAAs) stands in the way of veterans capitalizing on their earned education benefits. Even if a company or union has a Registered Apprenticeship Program certified by the Department of Labor (or a State apprenticeship agency), they must separately apply to their state's SAA for VA approval. This parallel process can be redundant and time-consuming. Moreover, if the apprenticeship sponsor operates in multiple states, historically, it has needed approvals in each State.

For example, NEIEP currently operates over 65 locations across the country. Although each facility uses the same curriculum and instructional methods, they must individually apply and reapply to SAAs, creating inefficiencies and administrative burdens. The 2017 VALOR Act made some progress in reducing these burdens by allowing multi-state apprenticeship sponsors to work with a single “headquarters” SAA for approval and accelerating multi-state program certification. Despite this advancement, unions, which typically do not meet the criteria under the VALOR Act, are still at a disadvantage with regards to the application process. A thorough review and revision of the VALOR Act could simplify approval processes and broaden access to union apprenticeships for veterans.

Ideally, VA, DOL, and SAAs should work together on data-sharing systems so that when a program is registered or a veteran enrolls in a registered apprenticeship program, the approval for education benefits is almost automatic. This collaboration would establish a single, unified approval process instead of two separate tracks. If legislative changes are necessary, Congress should amend Title 38 to recognize DOL registration as fulfilling SAA requirements or further revise the VALOR Act to cover all multi-state scenarios.

Recommendation 3: Enhance Financial Support for Veteran Apprentices – Especially Housing Allowances

To attract more transitioning service members into skilled trades apprenticeships, we need to ensure that veterans participating in these programs receive sufficient

financial support, comparable to what they would get attending traditional college programs. Specifically, the housing allowance for apprentices under the Post-9/11 GI Bill should be improved to eliminate disincentives. Currently, a veteran using the GI Bill in an apprenticeship or on-the-job training program receives a Monthly Housing Allowance (MHA) that begins at the same rate as a full-time student's allowance but then decreases by 20 percent every 6 months of training. This means that as a veteran advances and presumably gains more skills (and possibly increases family obligations), their VA housing support significantly declines. In one analysis, *after 2 years, a veteran apprentice only receives 20 percent of their original allotment, turning what was once a robust living allowance into a small sum that barely covers groceries.* Conversely, a veteran attending a university continues to receive their full housing stipend throughout their entire education. The financial disparity can be striking. For example, in Fiscal Year 2025, both the University of Connecticut (UConn) and IUEC Local 91 (Connecticut) will have a Monthly Housing Allowance (MHA) of \$2,646. Over 4 years, an in-state UConn student would receive about \$95,000 in MHA, along with \$20,366 in tuition coverage per year—totaling roughly \$175,000 in benefits. In comparison, a veteran in the IUEC/NEIEP apprenticeship in Connecticut would receive just over \$57,000 in total MHA, a difference of approximately \$118,000. This stark disparity discourages many veterans from choosing OJT/APP pathways.

Congress should take action to level the playing field by offering full housing allowance support throughout a veteran's apprenticeship training. H.R. 982 – The Warrior to Workforce Act, sponsored by Rep. Van Orden, is a positive step. We strongly endorse this bill, but it should be viewed as the start of broader efforts to close the GI Bill value gap for veterans in OJT/APP programs. Removing the stepped-down reduction would ensure fair housing aid for OJT learners, as experts recommend. This change would make apprenticeships far more financially appealing. Allowing veterans to fully use their GI Bill for living expenses during apprenticeships will support their families' financial stability and enable them to focus on learning their trade. It also clearly shows that trades are valued equally with college education. There's no reason a veteran who, for example, wants to become an elevator mechanic or HVAC technician, should have to forfeit thousands of dollars in benefits compared to peers attending college. By aligning the housing allowance policy, Congress and VA would eliminate a major disincentive that currently discourages some veterans from pursuing apprenticeships.

Key Steps Moving Forward

By supporting organizations like Helmets to Hardhats, veterans are more likely to find careers in labor organizations. Simplifying the process for GI Bill approval allows these organizations to enroll veterans quickly, enabling them to receive their earned education benefits. Continuing efforts to close the gap in the use of education benefits for OJT/APP programs and traditional universities will encourage more veterans to pursue careers in labor and strengthen the veteran workforce in America. We urge the Committee to review the benefits structure to ensure fair access for all eligible veterans, whether they choose a university or an apprenticeship path. In support of that goal, we respectfully submit these recommendations.

Prepared Statement of 50strong



Statement for the Record
SUBMITTED TO THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
by Kandi Tillman

*including Appendix sharing by
Employers & Industry Partners*

for the Dec 2, 2025 Oversight Hearing

“Strengthening the Workforce of Veterans in America”

Dear Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record. As the Managing Co-Founder of 50strong, a social-impact startup launched in 2020, we have the honor of supporting many leading employers as they open & share employment pathways with the military community. We connect strong employers and engaged civilian professionals to strong military-affiliated talent - including transitioning service members, veterans, student veterans, and military spouses.

Our mission is straightforward: to help veterans and their families successfully translate military skills into meaningful civilian careers by helping employers that seek to employ them. We do this by building scalable, tech-enabled pathways that reflect what employers actually need to fill their talent pipelines.

50strong was founded on one principle: **if we want better outcomes, we must design around employers that already recognize the incredible strength of military talent.** We listen to what businesses - from Fortune 100s to small companies - need to hire, retain, and advance veteran talent. And then we look for smart ways to improve, support, amplify & simplify their efforts every single day.

This is why 50strong builds tools like our virtual Meetups and our new Mentoring platform for on-demand 1:1 conversations with industry professionals. These tools help

align veteran pathways to real, high-demand opportunities. In 2025, nearly 15,000 military-affiliated job seekers will use these tools. Importantly, they are all built & deployed with zero taxpayer dollars.

Based on our on-the-ground work, I'd like to offer several key insights for the Subcommittee's consideration:

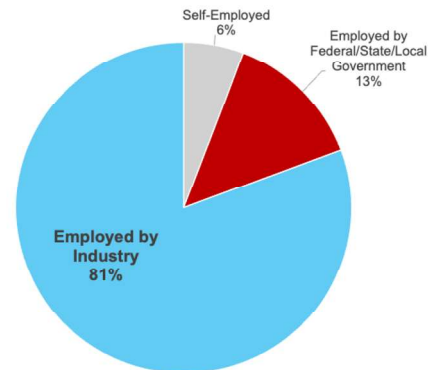
Insight #1: Private Sector Input Is Critical.

The covenant that our government holds with those who serve is sacred. Federal programs form the cornerstone of how our nation repays its debt to service members and their families. Today, our government invests "more than \$13 billion in military-to-civilian employment transition support programs" via 45 federal programs across 12 federal agencies.¹ Yet those programs alone cannot ensure sustained success after military service; this is due to fragmentation, lack of oversight, and an outsized focus on education vs employment - all of which should be addressed.

Therefore, we must embrace private industry as a critical stakeholder in veteran employment - especially as more than 80% of America's workforce is employed by private industry.² Private employers are not an afterthought in the transition journey; they are the destination. They provide the paychecks, purpose, and progression that anchor every successful reintegration. Despite this, employers are too often absent from national veteran discussions.

Sustainable veteran success depends not only on care and community but also on employment and economic opportunity. Employers must continue to be engaged as full partners, not treated as beneficiaries of public programs.

Employment by Sector, 2024



Source: Source: Employment Projections program, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

¹ Rand, "Federal and Nonprofit Support for Veterans Transitioning to the Civilian Workforce", https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RBA1363-3.html

² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Current Employment Statistics – Employment by Major Industry Sector*, September 2025. <https://www.bls.gov/emp/tables/employment-by-major-industry-sector.htm>

Further, the private sector is built to innovate - to iterate quickly, scale efficiently, and measure outcomes through performance and value creation. Private companies have both the technical expertise and incentive to build sustainable, scalable solutions that can complement and extend public programs. In the veteran support ecosystem, we need this innovation.

Insight #2: Non-Traditional Pathways Must Be Embraced.

In my testimony before this Subcommittee earlier this year, I emphasized the importance of employment outcomes for military-affiliated students.³ Currently, nearly one million students use GI Bill benefits across 36,794 VA-approved programs.⁴ But too often, veterans use their hard-earned education benefits to pursue traditional degree programs by default to help “correct” this gap. Higher education can certainly provide value, but employers increasingly tell us they need faster, skills-based pipelines - apprenticeships, licensure, certifications, and on-the-job training opportunities that bypass the four-year degree requirement. A degree is one approach, but it cannot be the only one.

The VA spends billions annually on higher education benefits, yet outcomes are not systematically tracked, and schools are not required to invest in career preparation. This matters not only for taxpayer accountability but also for military recruiting, which depends on demonstrating the long-term return of these benefits. At the same time, education itself is evolving: it is becoming more online, more modular, and more ROI-driven. A college degree is no longer a guaranteed ticket to economic mobility for anyone, as research from the Burning Glass Institute has shown⁵.

Therefore, we must ensure that the services we provide to veterans reflect this new reality of the civilian workforce.

However, VA's own funding patterns highlight a gap for meaningful on-the-job training pathways. More than half (approximately 52%) of all programs approved by VA for GI Bill benefits are on-the-job training or apprenticeship opportunities. Yet only about 0.5% of GI Bill students actually enroll in them⁶. Many of the approved programs are concentrated in government agencies or linked to lower-paying occupations, which do

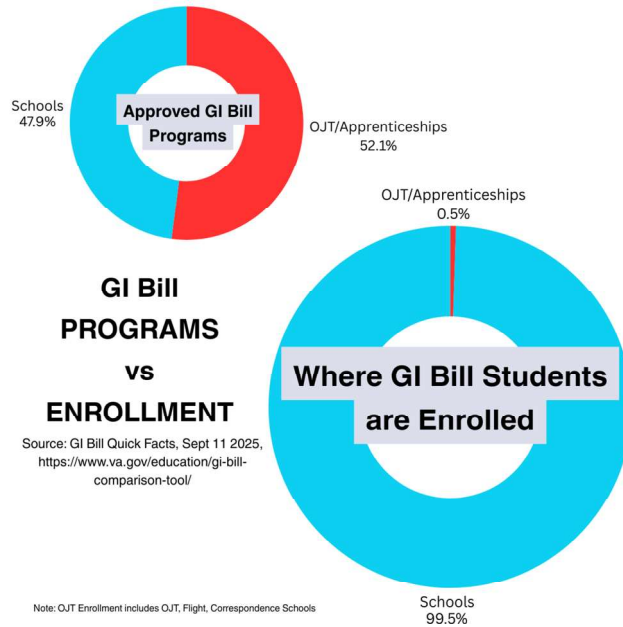
³ Written Statement of Kandi Tillman, U.S. House of Representatives, <https://www.congress.gov/119/meeting/house/118028/witnesses/HHRG-119-VR10-Wstate-TillmanK-2025-0325.pdf>

⁴ Department of Veterans Affairs <https://www.va.gov/education/gi-bill-comparison-tool/>, under "Download data for all schools"

⁵ The Burning Glass Institute, "No Country for Young Grads", <https://www.burningglassinstitute.org/research/no-country-for-young-grads>

⁶ Department of Veterans Affairs <https://www.va.gov/education/gi-bill-comparison-tool/>, under "Download data for all schools"

not align with the high-demand, higher-wage roles in technology, advanced manufacturing, healthcare, and skilled trades. This creates a lost opportunity for both veterans and employers. Veterans are often funneled into four-year degrees by default, while industries critical to our economy continue to face persistent talent shortages.



Insight #3: Industry-Driven Training-to-Employment Pathways are Key.

Leveraging Proven Models as a Starting Point

SkillBridge has been revolutionary for employers because it creates a clear on-ramp to evaluate talent before making a hiring commitment. It is truly one of the strongest pathways for transitioning service members, and for many employers, it serves as the very first entry point to building a veteran hiring strategy. Companies can see firsthand

the leadership, technical skill, and adaptability that service members bring, and that experience often builds the internal confidence and business case to expand veteran hiring across the enterprise.

As one strong example, one of our closest partners, **Lowe's**, has established a best-practice SkillBridge program that enables fellowship opportunities at any of their locations across the country. Their 12-week program, which begins at the start of each month, is designed to help service members bring their skills and military experience to leadership positions in the civilian sector, regardless of their education level. Last year, 90% of their fellows received a full-time job offer at the end of their fellowship.⁷ *This means that a service member returning home to Oshkosh, Wisconsin or Bedford, New Hampshire or Buckeye, Arizona after serving a 4-year enlistment has a pathway to a bright future in their own community on Day 1 of their post-Active Duty service.*

I'll also highlight another strong employer **Cushman & Wakefield**. They are a global commercial real estate services B2B company and a much lesser known entity to the military. They utilize SkillBridge to train service members into virtually any role from a variety of military occupations that don't often have a direct civilian equivalent. *They've taken on more than 100 Skillbridge interns into over 30 different types of roles with a 90%+ full time offer rate.*

Source: Written Statement of Kandi Tillman, March 2025⁷

Another 50strong win at HCA!
Transitioning USN female with
no healthcare background who
is now on her pathway to
become a nurse at HCA in a
Skillbridge capacity. Starts in
November and will move to a full
time role in January. She is now
an official student at HCA's
Galen College of Nursing.

Source: Shared on LinkedIn via 50strong Partner, **HCA Healthcare**, Nov 2025⁸

⁷ Written Statement of Kandi Tillman, U.S. House of Representatives, <https://www.congress.gov/119/meeting/house/118028/witnesses/HHRG-119-VR10-Wstate-TillmanK-2025-0325.pdf>

⁸ Post on LinkedIn, https://www.linkedin.com/posts/kanditillman_happy-monday-i-love-getting-texts-like-this-activity-7391118142904782848-WbrF7utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop&rcm=ACoAAAB9h9UB6ZabJXsVjYpS99MaJSEzIRkfCQE

Yet, while SkillBridge is an important success story, it is limited to those still on active duty. Once a service member separates, that pathway disappears. Veterans who are already out of uniform often have just as much to offer - but employers lose that structured, low-risk opportunity to bring them onboard. If we want to close the translation gap, we must create parallel on-ramps for separated veterans: internships, apprenticeships, and fellowship-style programs that allow employers to evaluate talent while veterans gain meaningful civilian experience.

Similarly, the **Military Spouse Career Accelerator Pilot (MSCAP)**⁹ has shown how structured, employer-driven opportunities can accelerate workforce participation for military families. This pilot yielded "...more than 1,200 fellowship placements and an 86% employment offer rate..."¹⁰ and is now a permanent program.

Current Examples from Industry Leaders

Importantly, employers are funding & opening innovative pathways for military-affiliated talent. Examples include the Hiring Our Heroes Skilled Trades Academy with initial funding by **Lowe's Foundation**, **John Deere's** Tech Program (a two-year associate's degree program that trains students to become technicians at dealerships across the U.S.), **Wells Fargo's** Julie Scammahorn National Military Apprenticeship Program that supports various banking industry roles and **Amazon's** Data Center Engineering Operations (DCEO) Pilot.

Amplifying the Role of Apprenticeship Intermediaries

One of the most practical solutions to accelerate veteran participation in Department of Labor-registered apprenticeships is to strengthen the role of apprenticeship intermediaries. These are organizations that act as connectors between employers, training providers, and federal or state agencies. They help employers navigate the complex Department of Labor registration process, standardize paperwork, align training curricula, and often shoulder much of the administrative burden that would otherwise deter small and mid-sized businesses from participating.

For large corporations, intermediaries create efficiencies that allow them to scale apprenticeships across multiple states. For small businesses, they make participation possible in the first place. With 33 million small businesses employing nearly half of the

⁹ DoD Spouse Education and Career Opportunities, <https://myseco.militaryonesource.mil/portal/article/military-spouse-career-accelerator-pilot>

¹⁰ DoD Spouse Education and Career Opportunities, <https://myseco.militaryonesource.mil/portal/article/military-spouse-career-accelerator-pilot>

U.S. private-sector workforce, intermediaries are essential to opening these opportunities to a much broader set of employers.

Unfortunately, the role of intermediaries is not well understood outside of workforce policy circles, and many employers are unaware that these resources even exist. Congress has an opportunity to amplify the role of these intermediaries, ensuring they are visible, well-funded, and equipped to extend apprenticeship access to veterans nationwide.

Policy Recommendations

For this Subcommittee's consideration:

- 1. Establish a pilot to evaluate the outcomes of a paid training program for veterans that have recently separated and that were not able to participate in a SkillBridge opportunity prior to separation.** While SkillBridge has proven highly effective for active-duty service members, there remains a gap for those who have already separated but still need structured training pathways to gain civilian experience. A targeted pilot could extend paid, employer-sponsored training opportunities to recent veterans within their first 12 months after separation, helping bridge the final step from service to sustained employment in industries of high need. Too often, service members leave the military, enroll in higher education by default, and then struggle to connect their degree - or lack of degree - to real employment opportunities. Meanwhile, employers continue to face critical shortages in advanced manufacturing, technology, healthcare, and the skilled trades. What's missing is a structured, employer-driven pathway that allows separated veterans to translate their skills into meaningful careers without requiring a four-year degree. *The pilot should be for similar funding & duration as what was originally approved for MSCAP.*
- 2. Modernize the VA Work-Study Program to include private-sector employers as potential "employers" for student veterans.** Currently, VA work-study opportunities are limited to roles within government or approved nonprofits and educational institutions. Expanding eligibility to include **civilian private employers** - particularly in high-demand industries - would give student veterans hands-on experience that is directly relevant to their field of study and increases employability upon graduation.
- 3. Renew DoL VETS's focus on apprenticeship and earn-and-learn pathways.** Apprenticeships are a proven, debt-free bridge between education and employment. Expanding veteran participation across emerging sectors such as skilled trades, technology, healthcare, and advanced manufacturing can

strengthen both our workforce and our economy while honoring the skills veterans already possess.

Employer Perspectives (Appendices)

The strongest validation of these ideas comes not from me, but from employers themselves. In the attached appendices, you will find direct statements from our partners - including Fortune 100 corporations, healthcare systems, and a local chamber of commerce.

I urge the Subcommittee to consider these industry perspectives as evidence that **when business needs align with veteran strengths, everyone wins** - veterans, employers, and the American economy.

Appendix: Statement Provided by Lowe's Companies Inc.*as shared by**Michael Piper, Sr. Manager, Early and Emerging Talent*

At Lowe's, we view the military community as one of our vital talent pipelines, strengthening our workforce and driving business performance. Nearly 26,000 of our associates are veterans, service members, or military spouses. More than 11 percent of Lowe's 2024 new hires came from the military community. Military experience brings the technical and leadership skills that our business depends on. We are focused on translating those capabilities into career pathways that meet real labor market needs and also help members of the military community build successful careers.

Our approach centers on skills-based hiring and workforce development, not credentials alone. Through on-the-job training and the Lowe's SkillBridge Fellowship, we provide structured entry points into retail management, supply chain, and IT and technical careers. In 2024, 90 percent of SkillBridge fellowships were store-based, 95 percent of participants received a full-time offer following completion, and 80 percent were enlisted service members transitioning directly into civilian careers. These pathways align talent supply with operational demand, helping Lowe's close workforce gaps while creating lasting career opportunities for the military community.

This is more than a social commitment; it is a business imperative. By investing in the military community, we are advancing a workforce defined by skill and dependability that supports Lowe's long-term growth and advances the future of the skilled trades sector through the Lowe's Foundation.

Appendix: Statement Provided by Lowe's Foundation

as shared by

Betsy Conway, Director, Lowe's Foundation

The Lowe's Foundation has committed \$50 million over five years to prepare 50,000 people for skilled trades careers, a critical investment in addressing America's widening skilled labor gap. This commitment is focused on expanding access to training programs, fostering alternative career pathways, and ensuring that underserved communities have opportunities to pursue sustainable careers in trades such as electrical, plumbing, HVAC, and carpentry.

As part of this initiative, the Lowe's Foundation partnered with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation's Hiring Our Heroes to launch the Skilled Trades Academy. The Academy provides members of the military community, including transitioning service members, veterans, and military spouses, with hands-on training, industry-recognized credentials, and direct connections to employers. Its goal is to bridge the gap between military experience and civilian career opportunities by equipping participants with both the technical skills and the career readiness needed to thrive in high-demand trades.

Through these efforts, the Lowe's Foundation is helping build a stronger, more resilient workforce while honoring the service of military families and supporting their transition into meaningful civilian careers.

Appendix: Statement Provided by Wells Fargo*as shared by**Sean Passmore, Head of Enterprise Military and Veteran Initiatives*

Wells Fargo's **Julie Scammahorn National Military Apprenticeship Program** is a U.S. Department of Labor-registered, competency-based training program designed to support U.S. military veterans - including Guard and Reserve members - transitioning into roles at the company. Apprentices are hired as full-time employees and receive comprehensive support through assigned job coaches, bi-monthly check-ins, and instructor-led training.

The program supports both individual and cohort-based hiring across all business divisions, with commonly filled roles including Branch Management, Business Execution, Data Analytics, Risk Consultation and Technology Consulting. These roles align with 12 approved Department of Labor learning paths, ensuring structured development and career progression opportunity enterprise wide. In partnership with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, eligible veterans and service members enrolled in Registered Apprenticeship programs may access VA education benefits to support their career advancement. Wells Fargo is proud to offer apprenticeship opportunities that meet the criteria for these benefits, allowing participants to leverage their VA entitlements while gaining hands-on experience in high-demand roles. This initiative reflects Wells Fargo's ongoing commitment to supporting the military community and expanding access to meaningful career pathways.

In 2021, the national completion rate for Registered Apprenticeship programs in the United States was below 35%. In contrast, since 2021, Wells Fargo has achieved a 76% completion rate—more than double the national average—highlighting the program's strong engagement and effectiveness. Of those who completed the program since 2021, 88% remain with the company, underscoring Wells Fargo's success in developing and retaining talent.

Appendix: Statement Provided by Cushman & Wakefield*as shared by**Matt Disher, Executive Director of Military & Veterans Programs*

As a leading global commercial real estate services business that provides services to other businesses, we are a much lesser-known entity to the military than other consumer-facing brands. Yet we hire veterans into technical positions, among other roles, often by finding smart ways to engage with them directly.

Cushman & Wakefield leverages post-military talent by valuing not only technical skills but also leadership, planning, and operational expertise. We manage 6 billion square feet of property that demands rapid, on-demand staffing so traditional hiring pipelines and manual relationships with government career solutions can be ineffective due to their inability to be reactive.

To meet this need, we've built a best-in-class program featuring a dedicated outreach team, targeted digital campaigns, SkillBridge and fellowship offerings, employee mentoring and direct intake with our MVP team. This human-first approach ensures skilled trades professionals - often absent from traditional channels - are identified, engaged, and connected quickly.

Our targeted digital outreach methods are reaching millions of veteran and military-related households and career seekers each year, gaining tens of millions of unique impressions - allowing us to complement the traditional methods of outreach like career fairs, local/regional veteran service offices that can be under-equipped and hard to manage across a national footprint.

Until military service provides a full, quantifiable and adapted record of experience, employers must remain proactive in recognizing and translating veterans' broad capabilities into career opportunities which requires a dedicated and often manual approach to this very human process.

Appendix: Statement Provided by HCA Healthcare

as shared by

Chambala Roach, Program Manager Military Affairs

And

Jonathan Snider, Director Culture and Workplace Programs

On behalf of HCA Healthcare, we express our gratitude for the opportunity to support the impactful and meaningful work of this Committee. HCA Healthcare proudly champions members of the Armed Forces, veterans, and military families through dedicated hiring initiatives, strategic workforce development partnerships, and programs designed to help military-connected colleagues thrive in healthcare careers.

Currently, over 15,900 veterans, reservists, and military spouses are employed by HCA Healthcare. These individuals have joined our organization through robust military recruiting programs such as SkillBridge, partnerships with Hiring Our Heroes, 50strong, and our everyday recruitment efforts that recognize the exceptional skills and experience of service members. We firmly believe that structured talent pipelines create opportunities to highlight the unique expertise and leadership our military community brings to the workforce.

HCA Healthcare also provides military leave and supplemental pay for colleagues serving on active duty and maintains a Military Colleague Network with chapters nationwide to foster community and support. For those transitioning from service, our SkillBridge program offers clinical and non-clinical pathways to gain valuable civilian experience before separation.

Further investment in transition initiatives, upskilling programs, and career pathways will enable HCA Healthcare to continue leveraging this tremendously talented community and foster meaningful careers in healthcare. We remain committed to honoring their service and creating opportunities for military-connected colleagues to thrive.

Thank you for your consideration and for your continued support of this Committee's endeavors.

Appendix: Statement Provided by Fiserv

*as shared by
Meg Hendricks, Vice President, Head of Military and Veteran Affairs
and
Adam Schmit, Vice President, Talent Acquisition*

At Fiserv, we believe military talent brings unmatched discipline, adaptability, and leadership to the workplace. Our talent strategy focuses on creating nontraditional pathways into high-impact roles, particularly in Technology and Project Management. Through targeted programs, apprenticeships, and partnerships, we equip transitioning service members with the skills needed to thrive in the private sector.

By investing in veterans through training, tech apprenticeships, and direct employment, we're not only strengthening our workforce — we're helping shape the future of financial services.

One of the key challenges we face is the perception that veteran employment is only addressed as service members approach their transition—typically within the last year of service or after they have already transitioned. It is imperative that we foster greater collaboration between corporations, Veteran Service Organizations, and the Department of Defense to provide guidance and options from the moment an individual enters military service.

Every servicemember will eventually transition, whether after four years or thirty. Therefore, ensuring they have access to comprehensive information throughout their service is critical.

Appendix: Statement Provided by Oracle*as shared by**Melinda Jaffar, U.S. Military Talent Lead*

At Oracle, we are deeply committed to “veteran employment.” One of the most significant areas we’re seeing alignment is within our data centers - with Abilene, TX now actively hiring and several new locations recently announced. These roles don’t require a degree. Instead, they rely on the technical and transferable skills that so many service members and military spouses already have.

We are projecting to hire nearly 1000 vets over the next two years for our data center technician and operations roles. This demand will continue so we will need a steady pipeline that is always on.

Which leads me to, the challenge isn’t a lack of ability - it’s awareness. Too often, service members transitioning out of the military don’t know what to look for or how to align their experience to in-demand civilian careers. So, not only do we need broad awareness, we need workforce-driven training pathways.

We’ve built two approaches to meet talent where they are:

1. Direct Hire: An internal onboarding program for those with IT or data center experience ready to step into a role with minimal upskilling.
2. Train-to-Hire Program: We’ve partnered with Washington Vets2Tec at St. Martins University for those whose backgrounds don’t yet align, providing structured training and mentorship to bridge the gap.

Appendix: Statement Provided by Verizon

as shared by

Michael McCoy, Head of Military and Veteran Recruitment Programs

On behalf of Verizon, we express our gratitude for the opportunity to support the impactful and meaningful work of this Committee. Verizon proudly champions members of the Armed Forces, Veterans, and military families through dedicated hiring initiatives, strategic workforce development partnerships, and direct technology solutions provided to the Department of Defense and veteran entrepreneurs.

Currently, over 6,000 veterans, reservists, and military spouses are employed by Verizon. These individuals have been onboarded through robust military recruiting programs such as Skillbridge, our proprietary apprenticeship programs, and our everyday recruitment efforts, recognizing their exceptional skills and experience. We firmly believe that structured talent pipelines for critical talent segments create opportunities to highlight the unique expertise and experience our service members contribute to the workforce.

The establishment of upskilling and credentialing programs ensures that access to today's digital economy is attainable for service members and veterans across all generations. We are proud to have collaborated with organizations such as the Wounded Warrior Project, Hiring Our Heroes and 50strong to extend these programs to a significant number of veterans within your districts, communities, and nationwide.

Further investment in upskilling programs, apprenticeship pathways, and transition initiatives will enable Verizon to continue leveraging this tremendously talented community and foster meaningful careers. Concurrently, it will allow us to persist in developing the essential tools and technology required by our service members, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the entire military-connected community.

Thank you for your consideration of this statement, and for your continued support of this committee's endeavors.

Appendix: Statement Provided by Amazon*as shared by**Ian McDuffie, Sr. Manager, Global Military Affairs*

Amazon is launching a **Skills-Based Military Hiring Pilot** in the Fall of 2025 where we will open 50 Area Manager roles in their operations network for Skillbridge and direct hire veterans with 6+ years of military experience. After these veterans are hired, they will be enrolled in Amazon's military mentorship programs, encouraged to join their local Employee Resource Group chapters, and provided other veteran retention resources. Amazon will determine long-term program effectiveness by comparing retention rates and promotion velocity of skills-based hires compared to veterans with college degrees and non-veterans. Amazon believes this pilot will not only drastically expand its pool of military talent, but will onboard talent better positioned to thrive at Amazon.

Further, Amazon has also recently launched a **Data Center Engineering Operations (DCEO) Pilot** within its Virginia Data Center Network. Partnering with Northern Virginia Community College, Compass Tech International, Hiring our Heroes, and the Veterans Administration, Amazon has developed a 6-month training curriculum to train cohorts of 25 veterans and military spouses to become data center engineers. This program only requires a high school diploma; AWS and Virginia grants cover all academic costs; the students are paid their full salary during the entire program; and once students graduate and convert to data center engineers, they can partake in Amazon Career Choice, where they can continue their education accruing more data center technical training or pursuing a college degree. Amazon is launching the second cohort in January 2026 while developing a strategy to scale the program to other states.

Appendix: Statement Provided by North San Diego Business Chamber*as shared by**Christopher Thorne, MCPO/USN(Ret), Chief Executive Officer*

San Diego is home to one of the largest and most skilled military communities in the United States, yet it is also one of the nation's least affordable housing markets. In this environment, non-degree career pathways are essential to ensuring that transitioning servicemembers, veterans, Guard and Reserve members, and military families can remain in the region they served. High quality, employer led pathways, such as registered apprenticeships and structured pre apprenticeship programs, provide paid, competency-based training that leads to high skill, high wage careers without requiring a four-year degree or the immediate use of GI Bill benefits. These pathways not only align with the lived experience of servicemembers, they offer the level of economic mobility necessary for families to thrive in a high cost region.

Two San Diego partners in particular demonstrate the strength of these models. The National Electrical Contractors Association (NECA) San Diego Chapter, in partnership with the electrical trades, delivers tuition free, earn while you learn apprenticeships that combine rigorous classroom instruction with thousands of hours of supervised on the job training. Veterans excel in these pathways due to their operational discipline, safety mindset, and technical aptitude. The Patriot Group, a veteran founded utility contractor, provides another strong example through its Transition to Trades programs, which help servicemembers translate military skills into high demand careers across the utility, logistics, and emergency response sectors. Both organizations show how employer led, regionally grounded non degree pathways can deliver thriving wage careers that match the realities of the San Diego labor market.

For regions like ours, the question is not whether non degree pathways are a viable alternative to traditional higher education; they are a critical workforce necessity. Expanding, supporting, and elevating these pathways ensures that the military talent trained in San Diego can remain in San Diego, strengthening our local economy, our infrastructure, and our national workforce readiness. Non degree career pathways are among the most effective tools we have to help veterans build stable, prosperous futures in the communities they defended.

Prepared Statement of Helmets to Hardhats

**Helmets to Hardhats
Statement for the Record**

Helmets to Hardhats Statement for the Record at a Hearing before the House Veterans Affairs Committee's Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity entitled "Strengthening the Workforce of Veterans in America"

December 2, 2025

Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee:

I appreciate the opportunity to submit this statement for the record in support of the Helmets to Hardhats program.

Helmets to Hardhats is a nationally recognized initiative that connects transitioning service members, veterans, and Guard and Reserve personnel to Registered Apprenticeship programs in the construction industry. These apprenticeships are not just training opportunities; they are pathways to long-term, good-paying highly-skilled trade careers that provide stability, dignity, and purpose to those who have served our nation.

Since its founding in 2003, Helmets to Hardhats has successfully connected nearly 55,000 veterans to career opportunities in the building trades. In just the last five years, more than 13,000 veterans have entered Registered Apprenticeship programs through Helmets to Hardhats, demonstrating both the continued demand for skilled workers and the program's proven ability to deliver results.

At its core, Helmets to Hardhats is about results. Veterans who participate in the program are exposed to opportunities in high-demand industries where their discipline, leadership, and comprehensive trade and technical skills are valued. These secure careers offer family sustainable wages, secure health care and retirement benefits, and advancement opportunities – all of this helps prevent challenges such as underemployment, financial instability or a general lack of direction after service; issues that too often face transitioning veterans.

The Helmets to Hardhats program is a successful career transition and placement program that is built on strong partnerships with 14 major building trades unions under North America's Building Trades Unions (NABTU). These include the Teamsters, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA), International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE), United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters (UA), Ironworkers, Bricklayers (BAC), Boilermakers, Elevator Constructors (IUEC), Insulators (HFIAW), Painters (IUPAT), Roofers, Sheet Metal Workers (SMART), and Plasterers and Cement Masons (OPCMIA). In addition, Helmets to Hardhats collaborates closely with the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (UBC). These partnerships ensure veterans are guided into Registered Apprenticeship opportunities that match their skills and ambitions.

These unions, together with nearly 80,000 partnering signatory construction contractors nationwide, provide the backbone of the Helmets to Hardhats program. This foundation ensures that veterans are not only given access to a job, but to a career backed by organized training, industry standards, and employer commitment with healthcare, family care and retirement benefits.

Other key organizations including the Department of Labor Veterans' Employment and Training Service (DOL VETS), Hire Our Heroes, the Army's Reserves Public-Private Partnership (Army P3), and the National Guard Association of the United States (NGAUS) amplify the program's reach and reinforce its mission of connecting veterans to meaningful careers.

Helmets to Hardhats is a proven model of public-private cooperation. H2H leverages the strength of America's construction industry and the dedication of our veterans to meet workforce needs while honoring the service of those who defended our freedoms. By ensuring that veterans have access to meaningful careers, we also strengthen our communities and reduce the risk of issues that can arise when veterans struggle to find stable employment.

Helmets to Hardhats delivers exactly what our nation needs:

- A disciplined, skilled, and dependable workforce for critical industries.
- A career pathway for transitioning service members and veterans to access and achieve the American dream through hard work and good wages.
- An effective program that reduces veteran unemployment and its associated challenges.

I urge continued support for Helmets to Hardhats as a model program that demonstrates how targeted recruitment, Registered Apprenticeship programs, and strong career pathways built on partnerships with building trades unions, nearly 80,000 signatory contractors, and collaborations with organizations like DOL VETS, Hire Our Heroes, Army P3, and NGAUS can transform the lives of veterans while strengthening America's workforce.

Respectfully submitted,

Martin F. Helms
Executive Director
Helmets to Hardhats

Prepared Statement of National Association of State Approving Agencies

Introduction

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas and members of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, on behalf of the fifty-three-member State agencies of the National Association of State Approving Agencies (NASAA) and their over 220 staff members, thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on strengthening the workforce of American veterans.

State approving agencies are State approving agencies responsible for approving standard college degrees, preparatory courses, residency courses, license and certification exams, non-college degree (NCD), apprenticeship (APP), and on-the-job training (OJT) programs for the GI Bill. As such, we review programs to ensure they align with our mission and provide high-quality instruction and training that prepares veterans and their beneficiaries for lucrative careers as they make their transition from the military to civilian life. As pointed out by Chairman Van Orden, we are concerned that APP and OJT programs now account for less than 1 percent of the veterans using the GI Bill, a continual decline over the last decade due to a lack of awareness and little incentive to utilize this benefit to pursue workforce training. For example, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) reports that during Fiscal Year 2025, only 2,219 Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries began an OJT or apprenticeship program. During the same period, 78,382 individuals began receiving the same benefit while enrolled in undergraduate or graduate degree programs. We believe that the underutilization of this important benefit is partially due to lack of veteran awareness. Furthermore, VA admits that this benefit has been inadequately promoted and more should be done to ensure veterans are informed of all the potential uses of their GI Bill entitlement. It is important that the value of an apprenticeship and how it can equip individuals with the skills needed to quickly enter the workforce be properly explained.

Veterans that enroll in an APP or OJT can effectively use their benefit to transition more quickly into the civilian workforce while for themselves and their families. For this reason, we strongly support H.R. 982, *the Warriors to Workforce Act of 2025*, introduced by Chairman Derrick Van Orden in February of this year. This important legislation would increase the benefits that veterans receive during their first year of an apprenticeship by changing the law so that after 6 months of training, the amount of benefit veterans receive will increase to 90 percent as opposed to the current 80 percent prescribed by law. This increase will provide a needed incentive for veterans to use this program, while enhancing the likelihood that they will persist in their training, enter the workforce, and support their families. The sooner veterans identify a career path and training program that aligns with their goals, their chance for successful transition to civilian life increases significantly.

Over the past several decades, Congress has greatly increased the financial incentives for veterans to seek a college degree, but little has been done for veterans who seek practical on-the-job training rather than a college degree. While in the military, many servicemembers work in occupations that are more hands-on and can utilize these transferable skills that are greatly needed in the civilian workforce. With this increase in their APP/OJT benefit, veterans could be better incentivized to join the workforce immediately, thereby securing gainful employment, becoming a tax paying citizen and contributing to their local communities and families.

NASAA also strongly supports H.R. 1458, the *Veterans Education and Technical Skills (VETS) Opportunity Act*, which expands access to high-quality, high-demand skilled trade and technical training programs for those who served. Introduced by Rep. Juan Ciscomani earlier this year, this legislation ensures that GI Bill benefits can be used for in-person and hybrid skilled-trade programs offered at accredited institutions approved by State Approving Agencies. By requiring regular, substantive interaction between students and instructors, this bill protects the integrity of VA education benefits as students are prepared for employment in high-skill technical fields. As Rep. Ciscomani noted, this commonsense reform will expand the benefits that veterans earned to cover the costs of high-skilled training programs and allow veterans to receive training to address nationwide shortages in trades like welding, pipe fitting, HVAC, and advanced manufacturing fields. Similarly to H.R. 982, this bill can help to encourage more veterans to seek training in high demand occupations and provide pathways to successful careers in today's workforce. These bills better align training and education with employer demand while upholding quality standards and allowing veterans to use their transferable skills to pursue vocational and technical careers and contribute to the rebuilding of our Nation's infrastructure.

Finally, NASAA is concerned with some provisions of H.R. 2954, *the Veterans' Transition to Trucking Act of 2025*. While we agree with the noble intention of this

legislation to address a shortage of drivers in our Nation, we have reservations about the fact that this legislation removes State Approving Agency (SAA) oversight of trucking programs, an important protection for veterans and their families. Legislation currently exists that provides for the approval of national apprenticeship programs without removing SAA protections such as ensuring only high-quality programs are approved. SAAs have dedicated staff in each State to provide compliance oversight and training to approved truck driving schools, whereas the VA may face challenges conducting thorough inspections at these institutions. NASAA welcomes the opportunity to work with the sponsors of this legislation to address these concerns and ensure that veterans can more quickly and efficiently use their earned education benefits to enter high-quality training programs—no matter where they live or relocate to, without the loss of the protections which SAA approval and oversight can provide for them.

Information Required by Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, NASAA has not received any Federal grants in Fiscal Year 2025, nor has it received any Federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.

NASAA has not received payments or contracts from any foreign governments in the current year or preceding two calendar years.

**Prepared Statement of National Association of Electrical Distributors
(NAED)**



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ELECTRICAL DISTRIBUTORS (NAED)

**House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
Statement for the Record
December 2, 2025**

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas and distinguished members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a statement for the record on *"Strengthening the Workforce of Veterans in America"*.

About Us

The National Association of Electrical Distributors (NAED) is a nationwide trade association for the \$150+ billion electrical distribution industry which represents more than 600 distributors and manufacturers of electrical products with more than 5,000 locations in all 50 states. Our members are companies of all sizes - from small and mid-sized independents to large regional and national firms.

NAED member distributors are a critical piece of the electrical equipment supply chain, linking manufacturers to electrical contractors, who install the products we supply in commercial, industrial and residential applications.

We appreciate the committee for taking time to examine employment opportunities for veterans through the hearing on *"Strengthening the Workforce of Veterans in America."*

Examining how veterans can obtain meaningful work without a four-year degree career is an important and timely endeavor.

For members of the committee, we will present a few important topics and offer a compelling legislative solution.

Opportunities for Veterans

First, jobseekers seeking fulfilling, long-term careers will find strong opportunities in our industry. NAED is proud that our sector boasts high tenure rates with an average of more than nine years. This far exceeds national benchmarks. For comparison, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports a median tenure of 3.5 years in the private sector and 6.2 years in the public sector. NAED member companies also report low turnover, averaging just 18%, which is significantly below rates seen in many logistics-focused industries, which hover around 40%.¹

Second, employees can enter the electrical distribution industry with little or no formal training beyond high-school equivalency. Many times, workers begin their work as a Counter Associate to fill orders or as a Truck Driver to deliver goods to a job site, with a salary ranging from \$17-\$32 dollars an hour.

There are many career paths available for these entry level positions, and workers can seek employment in fields as diverse as Inventory Control, Branch Management, or Purchasing. Many of these positions can provide salaries of \$65 - \$70,000 a year.

Other career paths include Inside and Outside Sales positions, Digital Solutions Specialists, Transportation and Hub Directors. These salaries range from \$50,000 - \$226,000 a year.

¹ Article - Warehouse Worker Turnover Rate: Why It's So High and How Employers Can Fix It
<https://employer.eb3.work/warehouse-worker-turnover-rate-why-its-so-high-and-how-employers-can-fix-it/>





NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ELECTRICAL DISTRIBUTORS (NAED)

For workers who have obtained a bachelor's degree, other opportunities are available, including positions in Information Technology, Project Management, and high-level Sales, that range in salary from \$48,000 - \$300,000 per year.

Legislation

NAED and our channel partners represented by the National Electrical Manufacturers Association (NEMA) and the National Electrical Contractors Association (NECA), are strongly supporting **H.R. 4105, the Veterans Energy Transition Act of 2025 (VET Act)**.

If passed into law, the bill would provide manufacturers, distributors, and electrical contractors with a grant of up to \$10,000 for recruiting, onboarding, training, certification, and relocation costs for military personnel transitioning from service, veterans, or their spouses.

This legislative proposal is very timely, not only in relation to providing opportunities for veterans and their spouses, but also it will help to address worker shortages in our industry as well as the manufacturing and contractor sectors, at a time when demand for electrical and grid build out are expected to increase significantly in the coming decades. These positions are supported by the following:

- According to a NAED industry survey, the average age for employees in the electrical distribution industry is over 42 years old, and our members report they are facing headwinds on hiring new employees.
- NEMA estimates that the nation's energy demand can grow by 50% by 2050, and demand for domestically produced electrical equipment is on the rise.
- NECA reports that the Bureau of Labor Statistics projects a need for 80,000 new electrician jobs annually through 2031.²

Conclusion

Veterans bring exceptional leadership, discipline, and technical know-how that our nation urgently needs. Their experience in logistics, operations, and problem-solving makes them uniquely equipped to fill critical roles in manufacturing, distribution, and contracting, which is the backbone of America's electrical infrastructure. As our country modernizes the grid, deploys new electricity generation, and deploys advanced technologies to stay globally competitive, demand for this talent will only grow.

Careers across the electrical equipment ecosystem offer veterans and their families not just jobs, but long-term, good-paying careers with purpose. For the men and women who served, it's a chance to continue supporting America's strength and resilience in a rapidly changing world.

Respectfully submitted,

Bud DeFlaviis
Director of Government Relations

² Article - The Human Capital Gap: Filling the industry's growing need for a skilled workforce - <https://www.ecmag.com/magazine/articles/article-detail/the-human-capital-gap-filling-the-industry-s-growing-need-for-a-skilled-workforce>



Prepared Statement of University of Health and Performance

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony for the record on behalf of the University of Health and Performance (UHP). My name is Matt Hesse, and I am the CEO of UHP, a vocational school located in Gentry, Arkansas. Our institution is dedicated exclusively to empowering former servicemembers as they transition to civilian life, providing them with the skills, certifications, and community support needed to thrive in high-demand, non-traditional industries. I appreciate the Subcommittee's focus on exploring alternative career pathways for veterans beyond the traditional 4-year degree, and I am eager to share how UHP's innovative model contributes to strengthening America's veteran workforce and boosting our economy.

UHP was founded with a singular mission: to serve those who have served our Nation. We focus exclusively on former servicemembers, creating a tailored educational environment that honors their unique experiences and needs. Unlike conventional programs, UHP replicates the structure and intensity of active military training to ease the transition out of service. Our programs prepare veterans for missions in civilian life, emphasizing short-duration, high-intensity coursework in areas such as personal training, integrative health coaching, and culinary nutrition. This compressed, immersive approach allows students to complete their training in just 18 days—or 140 hours—compared to the months or years required in traditional 4-year degree programs or even standard semester-based vocational schools. By condensing the timeline without sacrificing quality, we enable veterans to quickly enter the workforce, often within weeks of separation from service, addressing the critical first-year post-separation period when many utilize their GI Bill benefits.

What sets UHP apart is our veteran-centric model, which not only delivers practical skills but also fosters fellowship and wellness through a community of peers. Veterans train alongside other veterans in a supportive, familiar environment that cultivates the values they adopted during their time in service—discipline, resilience, and camaraderie. This shared experience promotes mental and physical wellness, helping participants rebuild confidence and purpose. Our dedicated staff, many of whom are veterans themselves, serve as positive role models, creating a space where students can sustain and build upon the productive habits honed in the military. The result is not just skill acquisition, but holistic personal growth, as veterans find renewed motivation and a sense of belonging that traditional educational settings often fail to provide.

Our success metrics demonstrate the effectiveness of this approach. Based on survey data from our graduates:

- 91 percent are employed following completion of the program.
- 35 percent work directly in the health and fitness fields.
- 37 percent report an increase in income after graduating, with 93 percent passing accreditation exams on their first attempt.
- 98 percent describe the program as “effective and valuable.”
- 78 percent apply UHP's core framework—“Think, Train, Feel, and Lead”—in their daily lives.
- 98 percent have referred or would refer a friend to UHP.

These outcomes highlight how UHP equips veterans with marketable certifications and real-world readiness, leading to meaningful careers in high-paying industries that align with their strengths.

In conclusion, programs like UHP are vital for expanding non-traditional educational opportunities. UHP exemplifies how targeted, accelerated training can empower veterans to build prosperous civilian careers, strengthen our economy, and enhance their overall well-being through community and purpose. I urge the Subcommittee to support policies that promote these alternative pathways, ensuring more veterans can access the opportunities they deserve.

Thank you for your time and commitment to our Nation's heroes.

Prepared Statement of Wounded Warrior Project

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and Members of the Subcommittee – thank you for the opportunity to share Wounded Warrior Project's

(WWP) perspective on opportunities to improve employment pathways for veterans. We appreciate the Subcommittee’s leadership in examining how military-to-civilian transition, education, and employment programs can better support veterans pursuing non-traditional, skills-based professions.

Supporting long-term financial independence has been an enduring component of WWP’s mission to honor and empower wounded warriors. Beyond the services WWP offers to support veterans’ mental and physical well-being, our Warriors to Work program provides high-touch, career coaching services to warriors and family support members to prepare them for employment and enhance their overall financial wellness. In Fiscal Year 2025, we provided over 62,000 services to help over 1,200 warriors and family members achieve employment. Our national service officers and partnership network extend our impact even further – all free of cost to those we serve. Collectively, our engagements with warriors across the country have shaped our perspective on how the community is meeting veterans’ employment needs, including for those pursuing high-skilled vocations and apprenticeships.

The modern labor market increasingly rewards skills, credentials, apprenticeships, and hands-on training. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, nearly 60 percent of new jobs created between 2020 and 2030 will be in occupations that do not require a college degree.¹ Many of the fastest-growing, best-paying jobs, such as wind turbine technicians, solar installers, industrial machinery mechanics, commercial pilots, and community health workers, are built on apprenticeships, on-the-job training (OJT), or short-term credentials rather than 4-year degrees.²

Despite these trends, many of the Federal systems designed to prepare veterans transitioning to civilian life remain oriented toward a “college-first” model. Commitments to higher education at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) can and should continue; however, to keep pace with labor-market realities, Congress can help set new strategies to optimize veterans’ chances of finding successful and fulfilling careers after military service. We believe that meaningful progress can be made by reversing underutilization trends for OJT and apprenticeships; creating more consistency in VA’s Veteran Readiness & Employment (VR&E) program; and embracing innovation in connecting veterans to jobs in emerging fields.

Underutilization of OJT and Apprenticeships

Veterans have several avenues to pursue non-traditional careers, but current outcomes and observations suggest that existing structures are funneling fewer individuals toward these opportunities than might be expected. Across the past five fiscal years (FY2020–FY2024), participation in GI Bill OJT and apprenticeship programs has remained strikingly low, averaging only 1,700–2,300 veterans per year, representing well under one-half of 1 percent of all GI Bill users in any year.³ In Fiscal Year 2024, those figures broke down to approximately 776 apprenticeships and 1,008 OJT participants under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, versus 454,179 veterans and Service members using the GI Bill in that fiscal year.⁴

These results may be explained by how responsible Federal agencies coordinate their efforts. The Department of Defense (DoD) oversees the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), a multi-day event attended by Service members as a part of their out-processing from the military that includes several briefings, including Department of Labor (DOL) workshops, Small Business Administration information on entrepreneurship, Office of Personnel Management Federal employment information, and a VA-led seminar on VA benefits.⁵ While these three programs aim to support transitioning veterans and their families, these programs lack interoperability and consistent communication, often leaving veterans and their families alone to piece together fragmented resources across three separate cabinet-level agencies. Further, RAND and Government Accountability Office (GAO) have both noted a commonality

¹ U.S. BUREAU OF LABOR STAT., CAREER OUTLOOK: FAST-GROWING OCCUPATIONS THAT PAY WELL AND DON’T REQUIRE A COLLEGE DEGREE (June 2022), *available at* <https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2022/article/occupations-that-dont-require-a-degree.htm>.

² *Id.*

³ U.S. DEPT OF VET. AFF., VET. BENEFITS ADMIN. – ANNUAL BENEFITS REPORT FISCAL YEAR 2024 157 (2025); U.S. DEPT OF VET. AFF., VET. BENEFITS ADMIN. – ANNUAL BENEFITS REPORT FISCAL YEAR 2023 154 (2024); U.S. DEPT OF VET. AFF., VET. BENEFITS ADMIN. – ANNUAL BENEFITS REPORT FISCAL YEAR 2022 154 (2023); U.S. DEPT OF VET. AFF., VET. BENEFITS ADMIN. – ANNUAL BENEFITS REPORT FISCAL YEAR 2021 150 (2022); U.S. DEPT OF VET. AFF., VET. BENEFITS ADMIN. – ANNUAL BENEFITS REPORT FISCAL YEAR 2020 151 (2021).

⁴ U.S. DEPT OF VET. AFF., VET. BENEFITS ADMIN. – ANNUAL BENEFITS REPORT FISCAL YEAR 2024 157 (2025).

⁵ *Transition Assistance Program*, U.S. Department of Labor <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/programs/tap>.

among these programs – that they have historically emphasized college enrollment over helping veterans translate military skills into civilian jobs or apprenticeships.^{6,7} RAND also found that more than 95 percent of Federal transition program funding goes to education-related programs, while very few resources support direct employment or vocational pathways.⁸

Fortunately, improvements are underway. TAP has undergone reforms and now includes a standardized curriculum. DoD provides optional in-depth workshops to prepare Service members for civilian employment through advanced job search strategies and networking (Employment Track) and to guide them in exploring technical careers and obtaining necessary certifications (Vocational Track). DOL VETS administers three employment-focused workshops worldwide. The Employment Fundamentals of Career Transition (EFCT) is a mandatory, 1-day course that provides all transitioning Service members with foundational employment preparation, including labor-market awareness, transferable skills identification, and basic resume concepts. After completing EFCT, Service members may participate in optional 2-day workshops. The Department of Labor Employment Workshop (DOLEW) offers in-depth instruction on resume development, interviewing, and networking. The Career and Credential Exploration (C2E) track uses structured assessments to guide participants toward vocational pathways, apprenticeships, and industry-recognized credentials. All three workshops are delivered by DOL VETS facilitators through in-person, virtual, and online learning formats. These modules constitute the employment and skills-development components of TAP and are intended to support Service members in meeting DoD's Career Readiness Standards. EFCT is typically delivered early in the TAP sequence, immediately after initial counseling and DoD's "Transition Day." DOLEW and C2E are scheduled later based on the Service member's tier level and Individual Transition Plan.

While these programs provide high level links to information on GI Bill OJT/apprenticeships, non-degree training, and licensure/certification reimbursement, they do not go deeply into navigation of these benefits, nor do they cover programs such as Compensated Work Therapy (CWT), Individual Placement and Support (IPS), or VetSuccess on Campus counseling. Anecdotal evidence from WWP's Warriors to Work program indicates that many warriors are unaware of the available benefits – which in this context may include VR&E services, GI Bill OJT/apprenticeships and non-degree training, licensure/certification reimbursements, VetSuccess on Campus counseling, CWT and supported employment programs, and TAP-related career services – and do not learn that these benefits exist until years after separation. This concern was underscored in a Government Accountability Office (GAO) 2015 report, which found that VA's mandatory TAP benefits briefings heavily emphasized degree programs while offering limited practical guidance on apprenticeships or OJT.⁹

VA has since implemented GAO's recommendations by expanding OJT and apprenticeship content in TAP (a separate offering from DoD's Career and Credential Exploration track); publishing an employer guide on DoD and Department of Labor – VETS webpages; allowing electronic submission of employer monthly certifications confirming the veteran's participation; and, as of August 2020, modifying its data system so it can track how many veterans complete their OJT or apprenticeship experience.¹⁰ Despite this progress, many veterans continue to have an incomplete picture of the opportunities available to them due, in part, to inconsistent counseling and limited real-time information presented during TAP about non-degree employment routes.

To improve outcomes, DoD's TAP transition counselors should ensure they are guiding veterans to options that match their goals, disability profiles, family circumstances, and local workforce needs, especially when a skills-based pathway would be more appropriate than a degree program.¹¹ Even if warriors are aware of these nontraditional avenues, a 2023 GAO report explained that some institutions (with nontraditional training such as outdoor recreation certificate programs) are unable to accept GI Bill funding because they are concerned about the administra-

⁶U.S. GOVT ACCOUNTABILITY OFF., GAO-16-51, VA BENEFITS: INCREASING OUT-REACH AND MEASURING OUTCOMES WOULD IMPROVE POST-9/11 GI BILL ON-THE-JOB TRAINING AND APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAMS 2 (2015).

⁷ Meredith Kleykamp et al., RAND, FEDERAL PROGRAMS TO ASSIST MILITARY-TO-CIVILIAN EMPLOYMENT TRANSITIONS LIMITED SCRUTINY AND SUBSTANTIAL INVESTMENT IN EDUCATION PROGRAMS 51 (2024), available at https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1363-12.html.

⁸ *Id.* at 55.

⁹ GAO-16-51 at 2.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 22-23.

¹¹ *Id.* at 21.

tive burden pursuing GI Bill approval may create.¹² Thus, multiple factors are operating to move veterans away from pursuing tracks to high-skilled apprenticeships and vocational trades. While VA has tools that can help veterans explore and pursue those options, many service-connected disabled veterans remain unaware about VR&E and specifically the other program features that the GI Bill does not offer, including special equipment to help them mitigate or overcome the effects of their disability, such as mobility aids and voice recognition software.¹³ Moreover, approval processes are slow, guidance is inconsistent, and modern credential programs often fall outside VA GI Bill eligibility rules even when employer demand is strong.

In conclusion, veterans cannot take advantage of pathways they do not know exist, are unsure how to access, or are pushed toward programs that are not the right fit or do not lead to viable careers. To improve use of apprenticeships, OJT, and other non-degree routes, DoD, DOL, and VA could modernize their outreach, strengthen TAP counseling, and ensure veterans receive clear, reliable information long after separation. Doing so will allow more warriors to pursue employment options that match their skills, health needs, and family realities.

Inconsistencies with Veteran Readiness & Employment

Among VA's most notable occupational training programs, VR&E provides job training, employment, resume development, and job-seeking skills coaching for veterans whose service-connected disabilities make it hard to prepare for, obtain, or maintain employment. A meaningful number of WWP warriors – one in five (21.1 percent) – have used, or are using, the VR&E program according to 2023 Warrior Survey data. VR&E's recent challenges with high counselor-to-veteran ratios and geographic wait time disparities are becoming more pronounced, but there are other issues which deserve attention.

While VR&E has great potential to help veterans, inconsistent VA VR&E counselor guidance and decision-making can materially shape veterans' long-term employment outcomes. Highly variable experiences with VR&E counselors – ranging from those who fully support OJT/apprenticeships to others who strongly steer toward degree programs – lead to structural barriers and unequal access to the full range of employment opportunities veterans are entitled to consider. In 2019, GAO found inconsistent decision-making among counselors where veterans with similar disabilities, experiences, and goals may receive entirely different training plans based solely on individual counselor discretion.¹⁴ Labor-market data is not incorporated consistently, which can result in veterans being guided toward degree programs even when apprenticeships or OJT would better align with regional workforce needs as well as the veteran's own strengths.

GAO also found that VR&E lacked a mechanism to assess whether counselors were applying common planning factors consistently, raising concerns about unequal treatment of similarly situated veterans who may be denied benefits in a non-standard and arbitrary manner. VA subsequently conducted a counselor consistency study in early 2020 and provided targeted refresher training later that year, leading GAO to close its recommendation as implemented.¹⁵ Even so, VR&E still does not measure or publish outcomes by training track, making it difficult to evaluate whether degree, OJT, credential, or apprenticeship channels produce the strongest long-term results. Without transparent outcomes across training types, veterans cannot make fully informed choices, and Congress cannot effectively oversee and evaluate the programs it funds. Even employers who are deeply committed to hiring veterans tell us the process to participate in VA-supported OJT/apprenticeships is confusing, administratively burdensome, and unpredictable. Small and mid-sized employers frequently cite administrative burdens and consistently lack the human resource capacity to navigate VA paperwork, limiting the number of veterans who can access these options.

The impact of the VA VR&E inconsistencies is even more pronounced for warriors with the highest support needs. WWP's Independence Program participants, many of whom live with severe physical, cognitive, or psychological injuries, face unique barriers in traditional classroom environments. Yet structured employment, supported apprenticeships, and individualized technical training models have shown

¹²U.S. GOV'T ACCOUNTABILITY OFF., GAO-23-106149, VETERANS EMPLOYMENT: GI BILL BENEFITS CAN HELP LEAD TO OUTDOOR RECREATION CAREERS 9 (2023).

¹³U.S. GOV'T ACCOUNTABILITY OFF., GAO-21-450, VA COULD BETTER INFORM VETERANS WITH DISABILITIES ABOUT THEIR EDUCATION BENEFIT OPTIONS 8 (2021).

¹⁴U.S. GOV'T ACCOUNTABILITY OFF., GAO-20-28, VA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AND EMPLOYMENT: ADDITIONAL ASSESSMENT COULD ENHANCE CONSISTENCY AMONG COUNSELORS 7 (2019).

¹⁵*Id.* at 13.

strong promise when paired with coaching, memory supports, workplace accommodations, and employer education regarding invisible injuries. These models can open channels to independence for warriors who might otherwise be excluded from the workforce, yet they remain difficult to access through current VA programs.

Current VR&E eligibility rules are also limiting the program's potential for improving the lives of veterans who are seeking to return to work as their disability picture changes. Under current law, veterans who left the military prior to January 1, 2013, must apply for VR&E benefits within 12 years of separation (38 U.S.C. § 3103), which means every Post-9/11 veteran who got out prior to this date has now passed that window of eligibility.¹⁶ For many wounded, ill, and injured veterans, this window may have closed just as they reached the point of stability needed to pursue retraining.

Veterans registering for WWP services do so on average 9 years after discharge, and nearly half of veterans responding to our most recent Warrior Survey report chronic physical or mental health conditions that worsen over time. GAO and VA longitudinal data similarly indicate that veterans with traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, chronic pain, and other complex conditions often delay pursuing education or employment services until well beyond the 10-year mark due to extended treatment cycles and fluctuating symptoms.¹⁷ As a result, many veterans become ready for apprenticeships, OJT, or industry credentials only after their VR&E eligibility has expired.

Eliminating the delimiting eligibility date would ensure veterans can access training when they are medically and functionally prepared to benefit from it, rather than losing eligibility because recovery took longer than the statute anticipates. To bring parity across all generations of service, we believe that the 12-year delimiting date should be removed for all veterans. VA already has the authority to waive the 12-year rule on a case-by-case basis if the veteran is determined to have a "serious employment handicap." However, the standards used to make that determination are not clear and, without specific guidance to follow, a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (VRC) is left to make a subjective decision whether to grant the veteran eligibility to the program. Wider and more predictable participation should be the goal.

Wounded Warrior Project is grateful for legislative progress already being made on several of these issues. We are proud to support Representative Hamadeh's bill, H.R. 1793, the *Veterans Readiness and Employment Transparency Act*, which would improve outreach by requiring informational sessions, and enhancing reporting measures to ensure better veteran outcomes. Furthermore, we thank this Committee and bill sponsor Representative Ciscomani for advancing H.R. 3579, the *Veterans Readiness and Employment Program Integrity Act* out of the House of Representatives this year; this bill seeks to impose limits to protect VR&E counselor workloads and to require the publication of current wait times sorted by regional office. We are hopeful that both pieces of legislation are signed into law during this 119th Congress.

Innovative Approaches as Gateways to Employment

Innovative approaches to employment include short-term, industry-recognized credentials that open doors to high-growth careers without requiring a traditional degree. Entry-level information technology and cybersecurity roles increasingly rely on certifications such as the Computing Technology Industry Association (CompTIA) Information Technology Fundamentals (ITF+), CompTIA A+, or CompTIA Network+, rather than two- or 4-year programs. Skilled trades and infrastructure employers prioritize Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)-10, OSHA-30, and National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER) Core credentials to demonstrate safety and job readiness. Cloud computing pathways, one of the fastest-growing sectors in the economy, often begin with the Amazon Web Services (AWS) Cloud Practitioner certification. Process-improvement roles across healthcare, logistics, and government frequently accept Lean Six Sigma Yellow Belt, while emergency response and healthcare careers open through short-term credentials such as Emergency Medical Technician-Basic (EMT-Basic). These programs can be completed in weeks, not years, yet lead to stable, well-paid careers, reinforcing that many of today's strongest labor-market opportunities are built on skills and credentials rather than traditional degrees.

As we work to ensure VA's education and employment systems reflect the opportunities available in today's labor market, we must ensure more veterans are enter-

¹⁶ 38 C.F.R. § 21.41.

¹⁷ See, e.g., U.S. DEPT OF VET. AFF., POST-SEPARATION TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM OUTCOME STUDY: 2021 LONGITUDINAL SURVEY REPORT (2022).

ing high-growth, skills-based occupations; have shorter periods between separation and stable employment; improve outcomes for historically underserved populations; and have clear, reliable data demonstrating that non-degree channels can produce wages and career progression comparable to or greater than those achieved through traditional degrees.

One example of how innovative, non-traditional training models can meet these needs in the field is Wounded Warrior Project's Drone Certification initiative, which demonstrates how innovative, non-traditional career avenues can support veterans' whole health while opening doors to meaningful employment. Through WWP's new Drone Initiative, warriors receive hands-on, employer-aligned training that prepares them for FAA Part 107 commercial drone certification, an accessible credential that does not require prior drone experience or a traditional college degree. This model directly addresses several of the most persistent barriers veterans face in the civilian workforce, including difficulty translating military skills, limited exposure to emerging technical fields, and uncertainty navigating nontraditional career ladders. By embedding this program within Warriors to Work, WWP ensures veterans receive not only skills-based training but also career counseling, resume writing support, and a bridge to employment opportunities in sectors such as construction, infrastructure inspection, public safety, agriculture, and environmental mapping.

Most importantly, the program's impact extends beyond career readiness to veterans' mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Drone operations promote focus, reduce stress, encourage outdoor activity, and stimulate cognitive engagement – benefits comparable to mindfulness practices and rehabilitative therapy. The WWP Warrior Survey found that warriors report renewed confidence, restored purpose, and meaningful social connection through team-based instruction and peer engagement. The program is also highly adaptable for veterans with physical injuries or mobility limitations, allowing them to develop technical expertise, contribute to mission-driven work such as disaster response or search-and-rescue, and retain a sense of service and identity. In short, WWP's Drone Initiative is more than a skills program – it is a holistic model that strengthens wellness, reduces barriers to employment, and empowers veterans to succeed in rapidly growing, nontraditional industries.

In conclusion, innovative, skills-based pathways like drone certification illustrate why VA's education and employment systems must be flexible enough to meet veterans where they are, aligning training choices with each veteran's goals, disability profile, family circumstances, and the workforce needs of their local community. By modernizing these systems to recognize short-term credentials, employer-aligned training, and holistic supports, we can ensure more veterans access meaningful careers that honor their service and sustain long-term well-being.

Concluding Remarks

Wounded Warrior Project stands ready to support the Economic Opportunity Subcommittee's efforts and to work alongside VA, DoD, DOL, employers, and our fellow veteran service organizations (VSO) to ensure every warrior can pursue the training pathway that best fits their goals and circumstances. Veterans bring extraordinary potential to America's workforce, and our systems must help unlock it. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record. We look forward to working with you to help improve employment outcomes for veterans.

Prepared Statement of The American Legion



**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD
OF
STEVEN R. BETSCH
POLICY ASSOCIATE
VETERANS' EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION DIVISION
THE AMERICAN LEGION
BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
ON
"STRENGTHENING THE WORKFORCE OF VETERANS IN AMERICA"
DECEMBER 2, 2025**

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December 2, 2025

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and distinguished members of this subcommittee, on behalf of National Commander Dan Wiley, and more than 1.5 million dues-paying members of The American Legion, we thank you for the opportunity to offer our statement for the record.

The American Legion is guided by active Legionnaires who dedicate their time and resources to serve veterans, service members, their families, and caregivers. As a resolution-based organization, our positions are directed by more than 106 years of advocacy and resolutions that originate at the post level of our organization. Every time The American Legion testifies, we offer a direct voice from the veteran community to Congress.

Transition Assistance Program

Attending the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is often the first time a servicemember learns about their veteran benefits, the various programs offered after military service, and the available career opportunities. TAP is an essential experience that can often be the deciding factor for a veteran's success during transition. Although the general requirement is to attend TAP one year in advance of separation, a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report indicates that "70 percent [of service members] did not start TAP at least one year in advance."¹ In fact, 21 percent attended only three to six months before separation. This is not enough time to develop a sound plan for the future. Unit leaders should be held to a higher standard when it comes to TAP attendance and timing for those service members in their care.

The first obstacle that should be addressed is access to TAP, such as ensuring consistent locations, ease of site access, and widest dissemination of any changes to class information or class cancellations. During The American Legion's recent visit to MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, FL in August 2025, TAP officials declined to meet and discuss the program with our staff. The Veterans' Employment & Education (VE&E) Division attempted to visit the program's advertised site, but the building it was assigned to was under construction and not accessible.

¹ Locke, Dawn G. "SERVICE MEMBERS TRANSITIONING TO CIVILIAN LIFE: DOD could improve the Transition Assistance Program by better leveraging performance information." Testimony before the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives. May 17, 2023.
<https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-106793.pdf>

Additionally, ensuring service members have access to TAP early enough in the process to make an informed decisions about future living and working arrangements is crucial to the success of their transition. Alternative options that increase accessibility, such as the Off-Base Transition Training program and digital delivery of TAP programming, are critical to spouses and dependents who are often deeply involved in household decision-making. The American Legion strongly supports encouraging the attendance of spouses and dependents at TAP events to develop a more comprehensive transition plan for the entire family. We also support the continued development of digital tools for separating service members and their families to access guidance after separation, when new questions about benefits and programs often arise.

TAP is the critical point in the separation process, where service members assess their future and decide how best to use the benefits they have earned. Whether they pursue employment or education, consider starting a business, or explore specialized certifications, these decisions depend heavily on their understanding of the opportunities available. At this stage, the military branches of Service must provide clear guidance in order to best support service members as they evaluate their options, plan long-term goals, and make informed decisions that will set them up for lasting success after military service.

Employment

The current statistics of employment for veterans year-over-year is positive. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the veteran unemployment rate was 3.1 percent in August 2025, down from 3.4 percent in August 2024. This is nominally better than the unemployment rate for nonveterans, which was 4.2 percent in August 2025, slightly up from 4.1 percent in August 2024.²

Manufacturing jobs, however, have seen a significant loss in employment over the last year. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' current Labor Statistics report, the manufacturing industry lost 78,000 jobs in the 12 months between August 2024 and August 2025, with a month-over-month loss of over 12,000 jobs. Although employment outlook on manufacturing jobs varies by subsector, emerging trends point to other potential opportunities for veterans in the years ahead.

The trucking industry is a natural fit for many veterans transitioning from military service. As one of the nation's largest employers, the trucking industry faces major challenges with recruiting, hiring, training, and retaining sufficient workforce—including a shortage of qualified drivers that reached 78,800 in 2022.³ To help remedy the shortage, The American Legion strongly supports H.R. 2954, *the Veterans' Transition to Trucking Act of 2025*, introduced by Rep. Chris Pappas and Rep. Jen Kiggans. This legislation strengthens veterans' access to meaningful, lucrative careers by authorizing the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to approve multi-state commercial truck-driving apprenticeship programs. By eliminating outdated, state-by-state approval barriers, this bill ensures veterans can more quickly and efficiently use their earned education benefits to enter high-quality training programs—no matter where they live or relocate to.

² "Industries at a Glance." U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. November 21, 2025.

<https://www.bls.gov/iag/tgs/iag31-33.htm>

³ "Driver Shortage Update 2022." American Trucking Association, Economics Department. October 25, 2022.

https://talkbusiness.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/ATA_Driver_Shortage_Report_2022.pdf

It is important to recognize that broader market trends in manufacturing do not dictate the future of the industry, and several interventions could prevent or reverse negative growth projections. Increased government or private-sector investment, for example, has the potential to spur job growth and revitalize the manufacturing industry. Momentum is already building around the “reshoring” efforts, with major companies publicly announcing plans to invest billions of dollars in U.S. manufacturing. Hitachi for example, announced a \$1 billion investment in U.S. manufacturing to support electrical grid infrastructure in Alamo, TX; Mount Pleasant, PA; and southwest Virginia.⁴ Johnson & Johnson invested \$2 billion to expand a manufacturing plant in Holly Springs, NC.⁵ These are only a few examples, but this level of investment can drive up employment opportunities in critical manufacturing sectors, where veterans already have many of the skills and qualifications to excel. Service members can use this type of industry-growth data to identify which regions of the country they will have the best opportunity to apply and maximize skills acquired during service. It is essential for TAP to incorporate current market and industry data alongside core programming to ensure service members make informed decisions while considering the federal programs available to them.

SkillBridge is one of the federal programs which separating service members are eligible for. This Department of Defense (DOD) program allows service members an opportunity to gain civilian work experience in the last 180 days of service by working for registered employers.⁶ The program helps service members be career-ready prior to their last day of service, creating a smoother transition from service member to veteran. SkillBridge can assist transitioning service members seeking employment in manufacturing by exposing them to the industry operations while strengthening relationships with potential employers. The American Legion often hears from veterans who wanted to use the SkillBridge program during their final months of service, but faced significant challenges receiving command approval or meeting command-specific eligibility criteria. The American Legion urges this Committee to work in partnership with the House Armed Services Committee to maintain oversight of this program and ensure service members are being given a fair opportunity to participate.

Another federal program ripe for reform is the military-to-civilian licensing and certification process through DOD. Veterans often earn technical skills through military job training and experience, however there is not an effective formal process for credentialing all these skills with a recognized civilian certification. Veterans then left with the burden of translating or proving their skills to potential employers, often placing them at a significant disadvantage to other similarly experienced civilian applicants.

The American Legion is proud to support veterans in finding gainful employment along their journey, through the National Employer Award program. Through this program, our posts and

⁴Anna Smith, “Hitachi Energy Announces \$1 Billion Investment in US Manufacturing Projects to Support the Electrical Grid,” IndustryWeek, accessed September 29, 2025,

<https://www.industryweek.com/leadership/companies-executives/news/55315910/hitachi-energy-announces-1-billion-investment-in-us-manufacturing-projects-to-support-the-electrical-grid>.

⁵Daniella Genovese, “Johnson & Johnson Investing \$2B in US Manufacturing, Creating New Jobs,” Fox Business, August 21, 2025, <https://www.foxbusiness.com/lifestyle/johnson-johnson-investing-2b-us-manufacturing-creating-new-jobs>.

⁶“Program Overview,” DOD SkillBridge Program - Program Overview Page, accessed September 29, 2025, <https://skillbridge.osd.mil/program-overview.htm>.

departments nominate employers from their communities who have demonstrated a strong track record of employing veterans, and submit them for recognition at the state and national level. This program incentivizes employers to seek out veterans for their hiring process, a practice that yields long-term benefits for participating companies.

The private sector has shown a strong commitment to addressing employment gaps for veterans. Recently USAA committed \$500,000 over five years through their “Honor Through Action” program. Their investment will go toward “helping veterans and their families find meaningful careers, “strengthen the financial security of the military community”, and “prevent veteran suicide and expand support for physical health, caregivers support community connection and prevention of veteran homelessness.”⁷ USAA’s commitment to helping veterans find gainful employment is a model that other private companies can replicate through similar programs. The American Legion urges the continued development of programs that incentivize private-sector employers to actively recruit veterans in their hiring processes.

Education

Veterans use their Post 9/11 GI Bill and other VA education benefits for a variety of reasons. Some utilize non-education benefits, such as the Veteran Readiness and Employment program, to pursue academic or training opportunities. While most veterans use education benefits to attain a traditional college degree, VA education programs support far more than four-year pathways.

To strengthen career opportunities for veterans leaving military service, The American Legion supports the reimbursement of fees for approved licensing and certification exams, including preparatory courses. This should apply widely to multiple career fields, from equipment operators to licensed insurance experts, to thousands of other possible credentialing opportunities. Reimbursement for these fees removes financial barriers for veterans and open doors to more opportunities. The American Legion supports H.R. 4594, the *Military Learning for Credit Act*, sponsored by Representative Maggie Goodlander. This bill seeks to broaden the use of the Post 9/11 GI Bill to include more examinations and assessments towards degrees, licenses, and credentials. This effort would expand the ability for veterans to prove competency and qualifications in a specific skill set. The American Legion supports this bill and would be inclined to support future legislation that advances credentialing access for veterans, consistent with our long-standing policy positions.

Veterans will have the opportunity to start new civilian careers in fields not available to them during their military service. The GI Bill is often used by veterans to earn a degree in a field completely different from their military occupations. I am an example of exactly this - when I separated from the Navy as a Submarine Navigation Electronics Technician, I knew I wanted to pursue my passion for public service, advocating for those who have been forgotten or left behind. I used my Post 9/11 GI Bill at a private university in Washington, DC. and graduated in four years with no education debt and a master's degree in public administration. I now have the ability to

⁷ “USAA Launches ‘Honor Through Action,’ Committing \$500 Million Over Five Years to Champion the Military Community.” USAA. November 5, 2025. <https://newsroom.usaa360.com/news/usaa-launches-honor-through-action-committing-usd-500-million-over-five-years-to-champion-the-military-community>

pursue my passion through veteran advocacy and public policy. Without the GI Bill and educational assistance from the VA, I would not be where I am today.

Another example of use of the GI Bill outside of a traditional 4-year college degree is applying the benefits toward apprenticeship and on-the-job training programs. The International Union of Elevator Constructors Veterans Assistance Program is leading the way in this area. The American Legion representatives had the pleasure of attending their annual summit in Providence, Rhode Island in August 2025 to learn more about this program. At the summit, attendees and panelists spoke about the success and challenges union veterans are facing across the country, and one notable conversation occurred regarding the disparate and unfair monthly housing allowance limits for apprentices. The VA currently applies a percentage of MHA based on how many months a veteran-apprentice has been in training, unlike any other VA training or education program. To promote apprenticeships and alternatives to the standard 4-year degree program, Congress should direct VA to correct this unfair calculation of MHA for apprenticeships.

The chart below outlines the disparity in further detail.

MHA Rates	Months 1-6 (100%)	Months 7-12 (80%)	Months 13-18 (60%)	Months 19-24 (40%)	Months 24+ (20%)
University/college	\$2,992/mo	\$2,992/mo	\$2,992/mo	\$2,992/mo	\$2,992/mo
Apprenticeship	\$2,992/mo	\$2,393.6/mo	\$1,795.2/mo	\$1,196.8/mo	\$598.4/mo

Using the 2025 BAH rate for E-5 w/ dependents in Washington, D.C.

The university/college MHA rate stays constant for the duration of the education enrollment, while the apprentice’s MHA is reduced to 80% of the MHA rate starting in month 7, and continues to decrease to 20% at month 24. This reduction disincentivizes participation in the more complex apprenticeships that can lead to higher-paying careers. The American Legion has heard concerns directly from union veterans who are using their benefits for apprenticeship programs regarding these issues, and correcting this disparity would likely encourage more veterans to pursue complex apprenticeships and increase participation in manufacturing and trade jobs.

The GI Bill is not the only option—some veterans may be eligible for the Veteran Readiness and Employment program (VR&E), which provides educational assistance for earning a degree or certification to start a new career that does not exacerbate a service-connected disability. Veterans who are interested in a manufacturing career can use this program to earn necessary certifications and recognition of skills to be successful in the industry. Although this program is incredibly effective for veterans, it is rife with operational challenges, most significantly ensuring proper staffing for the counselors who manage the program. The American Legion met with a number of student veterans to discuss common issues they face in higher education. One student mentioned that his VR&E counselor had stopped responding, and he was not able to get in contact with anyone else in the program for support. The student ultimately dropped out of college with only a few semesters remaining due to challenges that felt insurmountable without support. The American Legion urges this Committee to continue strong oversight of this program to ensure VA continues to address known issues.

The American Legion strongly supports H.R. 1458, the *Veterans Education and Technical Skills (VETS) Opportunity Act*, which expands access to high-quality, high-demand skilled trade and technical training programs for those who served. Introduced by Rep. Juan Ciscomani, this legislation ensures that GI Bill benefits can be used for in-person and hybrid skilled-trade programs. By requiring regular, substantive interaction between students and instructors, this bill protects the integrity of VA education benefits while opening the door to modern training pathways that lead directly to high-skill technical jobs. As Rep. Ciscomani noted, this common sense reform “expands the benefits veterans earned to cover the costs of high-skilled training programs,” improving the way veterans access their benefits and helping address nationwide shortages in trades like welding, HVAC, and advanced manufacturing.⁸ The Legion agrees: when veterans transition out of uniform, the nation has an obligation to provide them with every tool necessary for success in today’s workforce. The *VETS Opportunity Act* meets that test by aligning education benefits with employer demand, strengthening quality standards, and empowering veterans to pursue technical careers that sustain families and strengthen communities.

Educational benefits provide veterans with powerful opportunities to build meaningful careers, but their success depends on choosing programs that align with their interests and long-term goals. Too often, veterans enter college simply to “figure things out,” only to change direction later—wasting time and benefits in the process. Providing veterans with strong guidance early on in the transition process helps them select purposeful pathways and ultimately achieve more successful long-term outcomes.

Entrepreneurship

The entrepreneurship pathway remains the least utilized and least supported of the three TAP options, despite its significant potential for veteran success. Too often, veterans are told to simply replicate their military occupation in the civilian workforce—advice that overlooks the broader skills, leadership experience, and adaptability they gained in service. This narrow view reduces their likelihood to pursue business ownership or self-employment. Instead of directing veterans back into the same roles, we should promote entrepreneurship as a viable and empowering option. This pathway is frequently perceived as less attainable due to the high barriers to entry and lack of support, underscoring the need for stronger guidance and investment.

During The American Legion’s 2025 National Convention, the VE&E division hosted a Small Business Workshop which brought together experts and small business owners from across Florida to discuss a number of topics facing veteran owned small businesses. One major issue that was discussed was improving veterans access to capital. Due to lack of significant credit history or sufficient qualifications for loans through the Small Business Administration (SBA), many veterans find it difficult to raise the funds to establish a new business. The discussions at the event highlighted the resources available for veterans seeking to start their own business or expand their current business, and emphasized the importance of more communication and support in this space as many business owners are unsure about resources available to them. The American Legion supports expanding SBA direct lending under a modified qualification standard for veterans, which

⁸ “Ciscomani Pushes to Expand Veterans’ Access to Skilled Trade Educational Programs.” U.S. House of Representatives, Office of Juan Ciscomani. February 22, 2025. <https://ciscomani.house.gov/media/press-releases/ciscomani-pushes-expand-veterans-access-skilled-trade-educational-programs>

would significantly increase access to capital for veteran-owned small businesses and promote their growth and long-term success.

The American Legion strongly supports S. 3171, the *Veteran Entrepreneurship Empowerment Act*, introduced by Senator Markey, which removes unnecessary financial barriers that prevent veterans from starting and growing small businesses. Veteran-owned enterprises strengthen America's communities, yet veterans consistently report greater difficulty accessing capital, higher loan denial rates, and steeper financial hurdles than their non-veteran peers. This bill directly addresses those challenges by waiving SBA loan guarantee fees and lowering equity-injection requirements for loans up to \$1 million, ensuring that more veterans can secure the financing they need to launch and expand their businesses. Research shows that veterans are more likely to become entrepreneurs, that veteran-owned businesses are more resilient, and that lack of access to capital remains their top barrier to success.

This important bill reduces the upfront costs of borrowing, which can reach over \$100,000 on a typical SBA loan, and will free veterans to invest those dollars where they matter most: hiring, equipment, and local economic growth. The Legion also supports the bill's requirement for SBA to improve data transparency for veterans, reservists, and military spouses, which will help ensure federal programs are meeting their needs. The *Veteran Entrepreneurship Empowerment Act* honors veterans' service, strengthens America's small business economy, and advances the Legion's longstanding commitment to expanding access to capital for those who have worn the uniform.

The Small Business Administration Office of Veteran Business Development (OVBD) makes resources available to veterans who are interested in the entrepreneurship pathway. Veterans should first seek out Boots to Business Reboot (B2BR) classes offered by the SBA, which offers in-person and online training sessions and workshops to introduce veterans to business fundamentals.⁹ The courses provide an opportunity for veterans to learn the basics of business plan development, access to start-up capital, contracting opportunities, and other crucial skills for new business owners. Service members and veterans will find a comprehensive schedule that allows them to filter options by location and class type, and helps to overcome the knowledge barrier many veterans face when attempting to start a business. This information is crucial to inform any start-up plan, and gives veterans tools to decide if their plan is likely to be successful or if it needs more work. B2BR helps connect veterans with important resources and networks they may need in the future.

Finally, the SBA has developed the "Make Onshoring Great Again" portal, which provides a direct connection to verified U.S. manufacturers, producers, and suppliers.¹⁰ Veterans can take advantage of these timely opportunities and the important resources to become a major part of the initiative to reshore of the American manufacturing sector. The SBA's on-shoring portal and similar resources help small businesses, including veteran-owned firms, strengthen domestic supply chains, thereby reducing reliance on foreign suppliers and exposure to overseas disruptions.

⁹ "Boots to Business," SBA, accessed September 29, 2025, <https://sba.my.site.com/s/reboot-course-information>.

¹⁰ "Make Onshoring Great Again Portal," U.S. Small Business Administration, accessed September 29, 2025, <https://www.sba.gov/priorities/american-manufacturers/make-onshoring-great-again-portal>.

Veteran-owned businesses can be the future of U.S. manufacturing and now is the moment to proliferate opportunity.

Conclusion

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, The American Legion thanks you for your leadership and for allowing us the opportunity to explain the positions of our members on the importance of strengthening economic opportunities for veterans.

Veterans seeking careers in the manufacturing industry have options from all three different TAP pathways. Each step along the way, veterans can count on various support from The American Legion, veteran service organizations, the federal government, and private partners to ensure their success. However, it is up to the individual veteran to determine the pathway that best suits them and the moment. Right now, veterans looking to enter the industry as laborers may face increased challenges with employment. High tariffs and uncertain trade policies have had a chilling effect on production and manufacturing. This has led to layoffs that negatively impact employees. A veteran who is unexpectedly laid off from their job at any point in their transition may be at a higher risk for homelessness or other compounding factors that make transitioning more difficult.

Labor market trends are not definitive, and there are still indications that certain manufacturing sectors have ideal pathways for veterans. Service members who are planning on separating from the military should review all available resources to come to an informed decision about which pathway makes sense for them and their goals. For example, if the employment outlook in the government does not look promising, then a service member could seek other opportunities using their skills and credentials in the private sector. Access to information combined with the resources provided by federal, state, and local governments, private partners, and nonprofit organizations; veteran unemployment will continue to fall and outpace nonveteran unemployment numbers.

Questions concerning this testimony can be directed to Jake Corsi, Legislative Associate at jcorsi@legion.org.

