



**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**  
**REVIEW OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF VA'S VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AND**  
**EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM**  
**BEFORE THE**  
**SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**  
**COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS**  
**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**FEBRUARY 27, 2014**

Chairman Flores, Ranking Member Takano, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) appreciates your holding this hearing and welcomes the opportunity to share our perspective on VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Program.

With WWP's mission to honor and empower wounded warriors, our vision is to foster the most successful, well-adjusted generation of veterans in our nation's history. With military careers often cut short by life-altering injuries, it is particularly important that this generation of wounded warriors be afforded the tools, skills, resources, education, and support needed to find their new passion, secure employment, and develop fulfilling careers in ways that matter to them and their families. But, for a variety of reasons, vocational rehabilitation, education, and employment programs designed to give disabled veterans the help they need to gain success in the workforce are too often failing them. The VA's VR&E program, in particular, should be a key transitional pathway for wounded warriors.

Wounded warriors and WWP's field staff – who work daily with our wounded warriors across the country – report wide-ranging variability in program administration and education/employment plan approvals, counselor skills, experience, understanding of TBI and PTSD, and interpretation and knowledge of the program's services. Though some warriors report positive experiences and have worked with dedicated counselors, this represents the exception and not the norm.

WWP annually surveys our alumni of servicemembers and veterans wounded after 9/11 to learn more about their physical and mental well-being and progress toward achieving economic self-sufficiency. In 2013 of those pursuing an education – only about 20 percent were using VR&E

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while 54 percent opted to use the Post 9/11 GI Bill to finance their education.<sup>1</sup> Given that VR&E provides counseling and other supports and is limited to service-connected disabled veterans, it is striking that the majority of our alumni are selecting the Post 9/11 GI Bill - which does not provide the counseling and assistance that VR&E offers. Some warriors and field staff offer the reasoning that the Post 9/11 GI Bill is easy access and a swifter means to get an education. Many others report it is because they would have “more freedom to pursue what they want, not what the vocational counselor tells them.”

Warriors have reported instances of VR&E counselors challenging their employment aspirations by denying them access to their program of choice and pressing them instead to pursue “any job” as a goal. In other instances, wounded warriors seeking to go back to school to earn a second degree – to better compete in the job market – have met objection from counselors who view VR&E simply as a “jobs program.” Still, others, particularly those with TBI and PTSD, have had to try to convince VR&E counselors – who do not adequately understand TBI and PTSD (and the broad spectrum of these disabilities and their impact on an individual’s abilities and functional limitations) – that they would be able to handle and even succeed in higher education or employment. The prevalence of TBI and PTSD among this generation’s warriors underscores the importance of ensuring that programs like VR&E are responsive to the unique circumstances associated with those conditions.

Additionally, warriors report delays in receiving VR&E services, difficulty communicating and scheduling with their counselors, and reduced opportunities to achieve successful and timely rehabilitation. The size of counselors’ caseloads has particularly limited their ability to provide adequate on-going support and assistance to veterans throughout the course of their education or training program, especially to those with TBI and PTSD who need such supports.

The following comments are emblematic of the experiences of many:

“In my experience working with Voc Rehab counselors, many of my veterans were exasperated by their counselors and oftentimes felt as though their counselors had such a large caseload that they were not getting the attention needed... and more often than not being brushed off when they asked for assistance.”

“While many of the Voc Rehab staff are sensitive to the veteran’s needs, they do not seem to, as a whole, have an understanding of where the veteran is coming from... they are quick to write off a veteran’s career choice due to their disability rather than take into account things such as passion, determination, and drive.”

“Many veterans have to justify why they want a specific degree or [employment goal] and that doesn’t always match up with what the counselor believes that veteran can be successful at based on their history or [medical] diagnosis.”

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<sup>1</sup> Franklin, et al, 2013 Wounded Warrior Project Survey Report, 71 (July 2013). The percentage of alumni using the Post 9/11 GI Bill has continued to increase (53% in 2012, some 46% in 2011, and nearly 28% in 2010) while the percentage of alumni reporting the use of VR&E continues to decline (21% in 2012, down from almost 25% in 2011, and some 36% in 2010).

The recent Government Accountability Report on VR&E highlights VR&E's workload management challenges and gaps in VR&E staff training.<sup>2</sup> The wide variability in counselor caseloads among the regional offices is particularly concerning, as is the fact that the program is just now – at the end of 2013 and into 2014 – providing new staff training courses on mental health to improve counselors' ability to assist veterans with PTSD and other mental health issues.<sup>3</sup>

VR&E counselors need to be sensitive and not only understand the struggles, but also the strengths, of warriors with TBI and PTSD so that they, in turn, can help warriors recognize that they are not “broken,” but continue to have great potential. They must be partners in the warriors' rehabilitation, not critical gatekeepers who too readily dismiss “unrealistic” aspirations. In working with this generation, counselors must also understand the very profound disorientation experienced by warriors whose lives and life-plans have been upended and out of their control. As one put it, the “For me the most difficult part [of the transition] is finding purpose. [I] never really had to think about my purpose when I was in the Corps.”<sup>4</sup> A VR&E counselor must have the sensitivity, training and experience to help that warrior find new purpose, or to link him to appropriate professional help. But even the most capable, empathetic counselor – challenged with 150 other “cases” to manage – is unlikely even to have sufficient time to provide that warrior the needed level and kind of support. More appropriate staffing levels must be a component of refocusing and re-energizing this important program. In all, we urge the Subcommittee to make the VR&E program a greater priority through budgetary, programmatic, and outcomes-based action.

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office, “VA Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment: Further Performance and Workload Management Improvements are Needed,” GAO-14-61 (2014).

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 27 and 32.

<sup>4</sup> Franklin, et al, 2013 Wounded Warrior Project Survey Report, 108 (July 2013).