



**TESTIMONY OF
STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**HEARING ON THE TOPIC OF:
"PENDING LEGISLATION"**

OCTOBER 13, 2021



Chairwoman Brownley, Ranking Member Bergman, and Members of the Subcommittee: Thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit a statement on the pending legislation being considered. With a mission focused on empowering student veterans, SVA is committed to providing an educational experience that goes beyond the classroom. Through a dedicated network of more than 1,500 on-campus chapters in all 50 states and four countries overseas representing more than 750,000 student veterans, SVA aims to inspire yesterday's warriors by connecting student veterans with a community of like-minded chapter leaders. Every day these passionate leaders work to provide the necessary resources, network support, and advocacy to ensure student veterans can effectively connect, expand their skills, and ultimately achieve their greatest potential.

Draft bill to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to submit to Congress a report on the Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership (VITAL) program of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

We support this draft legislation, which would require a thorough report on VA's VITAL program trends and outcomes, in addition to establishing best practices, mandating outreach to build awareness, identifying barriers to access, and assessing the program's potential for growth beyond its current mental health focus.

VITAL is a joint effort between the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) that provides on-campus mental healthcare and support services to student veterans and, when needed, coordinates with VHA, VBA, and community care providers. In addition, VITAL provides education and training on student veteran-specific needs for campus faculty and staff to further aid schools in creating a more welcoming community for transitioning student veterans.

When viewed in the light of VA's "Whole Health" treatment objective, VITAL's broad portfolio of services stands out as well-designed, flexible, and responsive to the day-to-day needs of student veterans. And we know how important programs like this are to student veterans because, based on our public opinion surveys, healthcare and mental healthcare services have been identified as the top two issues areas on which veteran service organizations should focus their advocacy efforts.¹

It is a recurring theme in student veteran research that data collection and dissemination on student veteran-related program outcomes is often unreliable, so we appreciate that this draft legislation aims to solve that problem with a thorough report on program trends and outcomes. By analyzing this information, we can make informed decisions on how best to complement and improve the program going forward.

As a recommendation, SVA would like to see VITAL program capabilities expanded on campuses across the country by incorporating telehealth pods like those located at Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion posts through VA's Accessing Telehealth at Local Area Stations (ATLAS) program.² Opening telehealth pods on campuses would increase not only student veteran access to telehealth care, but the surrounding communities' access, empowering veterans of all stripes to seek and receive the health care services they need.

SVA hopes to see the bill introduced soon, and would like to thank Rep. Ellzey's office for their quick work to improve our understanding of, and the resources available to, the VITAL program.

Draft bill to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to make certain improvements to the Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) Program and Veterans Treatment Courts (VTCs).

¹ SVA public opinion survey data collected August 2020.

² Department of Veterans Affairs, VA and ATLAS. Accessed October 8th, 2021. <<https://connectedcare.va.gov/partners/atlas>>

SVA supports this draft legislation, which would require VA to conduct outreach on the VJO program to justice-involved veterans and relevant stakeholders, among several other improvements.

This draft bill was, at least in part, initially suggested by Eric Sowers, of The Ohio State University, as part of the VFW-SVA Fellowship. The Fellowship is a jointly-run program by the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and SVA that brings student veterans to Capitol Hill to discuss their policy proposals. His proposal pushed for better data on VTCs and how they could be improved to better serve justice-involved veterans' treatment needs and reduce recidivism rates.

Our research has shown that, once given the tools and support system they need, student veterans are among the highest achieving students in higher education.³ In much the same way, once provided the individualized assistance they need, justice-involved veterans often recover from earlier struggles and achieve success.⁴ Early studies of these treatment courts have shown positive outcomes, with VTCs providing access to a wide variety of VA and community-specific resources that reflects the same commitment as the broader VA system to treating veterans in a holistic, comprehensive manner.⁵

However, as a recent Government Accountability Office (GAO) report has illustrated, there are still areas in which VTCs and the VJO program could be improved.⁶ SVA is glad to see that this draft legislation addresses all of the suggestions for action from this report and more, including improving the identification of barriers to justice-involved veterans in accessing VJO specialists, improving outreach and awareness of the program, and reporting on VJO performance goals and VTC outcomes.

We have heard from student veterans and stakeholders about many issues that are outside of our traditional issue areas but critically important to our constituency. In this way, SVA sees VTCs, and the related VJO program, as important pathways to securing a brighter, more prosperous future for our country's veterans.

Additional Legislation

In addition to the legislation detailed above, SVA supports the following bills before the Subcommittee: The Vet CENTERS for Mental Health Act of 2021, the REACH for Veterans Act, the Solid Start Act of 2021, and the Expanding the Families of Veterans Access to Mental Health Services Act.

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The continued success of veterans in higher education in the Post-9/11 era is no mistake or coincidence. At SVA, we use the term "the best of a generation." In our nation's history, educated veterans have always been the best of a generation and the key to solving whatever problems our nation faces. This is the legacy we know today's student veterans carry.

We thank the Chairwoman, Ranking Member, and the Subcommittee Members for your time, attention, and devotion to the cause of veterans in higher education. As always, we welcome your feedback and questions.

³ Dr. Chris Cate, Student Veterans of America. National Veterans Education Success Tracker (NVEST) Report. <https://studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/NVEST-Report_FINAL.pdf>

⁴ Tsai, Jack, et al. *A National Study of Veterans Treatment Court Participants: Who Benefits and Who Recidivates*. <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5776060/>>

⁵ Justice for Vets, *What's at Stake?* <<https://justiceforvets.org/whats-at-stake/>>

⁶ Government Accountability Office, *Veterans Justice Outreach Program: Further Actions to Identify and Address Barriers to Participation Would Promote Access to Services*. <<https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-21-564>>