

Written Testimony of
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Before the
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Field Hearing on "Texas' Innovative Approaches to Jobs and Employment for Veterans"
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Chairman Flores and distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, my name is Gerald Smith and I have the privilege of serving as Director of the new Veteran Resource & Support Center at Texas A&M University. In addition, I am a retired Colonel with 30 years of service in the US Marine Corps.

I want to begin by thanking you for the chance to come before you today to present testimony on important issues relating to supporting veteran employment. At Texas A&M, we deeply value the sacrifice and service of veterans and their families. We appreciate this committee's actions to investigate and focus on innovative ways to support meaningful employment for our service men and women after they leave the military.

Today, Texas A&M remains committed to building upon our rich military history. Since 1876, Texas A&M has produced thousands of commissioned officers and has eight Congressional Medal of Honor recipients. No university in the nation (other than the service academies) has contributed more to military service than Texas A&M. In our Post 9-11 world, Texas A&M is undeniably veteran friendly; hence the large number of active duty personnel and veterans on campus. Currently, the veteran enrollment is approximately 650 students as Texas A&M continues to support veterans by enhancing their future employment opportunities through higher education.

Through a unique and powerful "dual office partnership," Texas A&M offers numerous programs and resources that benefit veterans. We now have two offices designed specifically to support veterans. The Scholarships and Financial Aid Veteran Service Office (VSO) is the direct extension of the original Veterans Advisory Office that opened in 1946. To better "serve well those who have served," we opened the Veteran Resource and Support Center (VRSC) in 2012. Together, these offices provide a robust capability that truly supports our Aggie veterans from "application to vocation."

The VSO offers streamlined processing of all federal and state educational benefits, deferred tuition pending Veterans Administration (VA) funds, veteran new student orientation, faculty and staff mentor training and cross campus referrals that reach campus wide. The VSO also

identifies and awards scholarships for veterans. We are a partner school with the Pat Tillman Foundation and currently have recipients on campus that benefit from that scholarship. Recent procedural improvements in the VSO have significantly improved military educational benefit processing to ensure the best possible financial support for both veterans and military dependents.

The mission of the VRSC is to constantly enhance Texas A&M's "military friendly" legacy by identifying, developing and providing uniquely tailored resources & programs to students that are: Veterans, Active Duty, Reserve or National Guard, military dependents, survivors and families in order to enrich their holistic development and overall academic success. By embracing the "application to vocation" mindset, we support veteran recruiting and college/career transitions by leveraging our Aggie Core Values to "Serve Well Those Who Have Served!"

The VRSC vision is to become "the Texas A&M System Model University" and improve our national ranking to truly become the university known for personal, all-inclusive support to Aggie Veterans and their families. As a highly visible institutional single point of contact ("one-stop referral shop"), the VRSC finds new avenues to maximize both TAMU and external resources to ensure world class academic and transition support that prepares Aggie Vets for future leadership in a global society. In short, as the focal point of Aggie Veteran collaboration and support, we foster a new sense of Aggie tradition to "Serve Well Those Who Have Served!"

Using these mission and vision statements as a guide, the VRSC has developed and implemented a variety of new programs that enhance veteran recognition, improve health service access, increase academic support, connects students with local community resources, and identifies employment opportunities (both full and part time). The VRSC was designed to ensure that Texas A&M continues to improve the quality of support as our student veteran population increases.

The VRSC recently launched the Aggie Veteran Network (AVN). It is designed to connect Aggie student vets, dependents, military families, and veteran faculty/staff with each other and with external organizations. The mission of the AVN is twofold: First, to connect those who are providing, or are willing to provide, resources and support to our students. The second part of the AVN mission is to link our military affiliated students with high-impact opportunities to support each other and the local community. In the next year, the AVN will link with the new Association of Former Student Aggie Veteran & Military Constituent Network. As these programs grow, they will become a foundational and innovative method to effectively link and network current student veterans with one of the largest and most active former student organizations in the country to promote countless internship and employment opportunities.

In 2008, the Mays School of Business at Texas A&M University introduced the Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans with Disabilities (EBV) which followed on the heels of a successful program launch at Syracuse University in 2007. At Texas A&M, EBV is a collaboration between the Center for New Ventures and Entrepreneurship, and the Center for Executive Development and Mays Business School. The EBV initiative offers cutting edge, experiential training in entrepreneurship and small business management to Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines disabled as a result of their service supporting operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. The intent of the program is to open the door to entrepreneurial opportunity for these men and women, developing their competencies in the many steps and activities associated with creating and sustaining an entrepreneurial venture. Importantly, the program is offered entirely free to qualifying veterans.

EBV has been a tremendously successful program for our veterans, specifically highlighting the role that entrepreneurship may play as a means through which our veterans with disabilities can take meaningful steps toward independence. Recent survey data highlighted that 66% of the Texas A&M EBV participants (for the five year period) had started and continued to grow a business. Of these respondents, 87% still had a business in operation at the time they took the survey. Participant comments included the following:

- “I have no words that can describe the effect this program has made on me. Life-changing is the closest I can think of. Dr. Lester, Ashley Crane, and Jennifer Cutler deserve great praise for the time and effort spent on the program.”
- “Hands-down one of the best experiences of my life.”

Along with Syracuse University and Texas A&M University the program was also adopted by Florida State University, U.C.L.A., Purdue University, University of Connecticut, LSU, and Cornell.

In the first year, the Texas A&M VRSC also started numerous other initiatives to fulfill the “application to vocation” mission to better support our student veterans (see Attachment A for the complete summary). Many of the VRSC new programs are focused on facilitating the veteran transition from the military environment to the college campus. These efforts included extensive partnerships, workshops, programs, and events that are focused on academic success and ultimately, meaningful employment after graduation.

To provide an immediate positive impact on the student veteran transition and initial academic success, the VRSC developed a series of initiatives in the new “Aggie Vet Connect Program” (see Attachment B for details). As “non-traditional students,” many of our veterans were unaware of existing campus and community resources. Aggie Vet Connect was designed to proactively provide student veterans with information about available resources. The elements of Aggie

Vet Connect include: New student conference presentations; Vet Camp; Faculty/Staff and Academic Advisor engagement opportunities and student veteran awareness presentations and panels; recreational sports/wounded warrior engagement; Peer-to-Peer Mentoring Training/Programs; and special events to promote veteran engagement with traditional students. As the VRSC prepares for the second year, the initial success of the Aggie Vet Connect Programs dictates that these programs will increase in both size and scope.

Within weeks of opening, the VRSC established a new partnership with the Texas A&M Career Center. With the Career Center's dedicated focus on student veteran employment, this partnership has continued to strengthen and grow over the past year. This partnership has produced a number of effective events and programs to include:

- One of the first events co-sponsored by these offices was the "Boots to Business Suits" program. The Career Center invited corporate leaders to discuss the skills valued in veterans, how veterans can be successful in the job search process, how employers assist veterans in making the successful transition into their organizations, and how veterans can continue to further their careers. As a result of the very positive response from student veteran attendees, this type of event will be repeated in the future.
- Throughout the year, numerous corporations and federal agencies contact either the VRSC or the Career Center to specifically discuss veteran internship and future employment opportunities. Our offices have developed a systematic plan to ensure that both the Career Center and VRSC staffs are represented at these meetings. This partnership allows both offices to better serve both prospective employers and our student veterans. Additionally, the VRSC now confidentially collects information about security clearances previously (or currently) held by student veterans. We are rapidly learning how to use this information to better "connect" students with clearances to federal agencies and corporations that require security clearances for future employment.
- In August 2013, the VRSC held the first "Vet Camp" to provide an in-depth orientation for new student veterans prior to the first day of classes. The typical "best practices" for this type of orientation tend to focus only on the immediate "transition to college" challenges. The Texas A&M VRSC and Career Center took a slightly different approach; we included topics and information that incorporated a longer-term perspective. The Career Center provided three presenters to stress the importance of "connecting" with their office and

employment resources early in their college experience to facilitate future employment.

In addition to partnership activities with the VRSC, the Career Center continues to develop and expand their own veteran specific programs. They have designated two staff members, both of whom have military experience, to advise student veterans. They added veteran specific questions to their post-graduation survey to track veteran outcomes. In their employment system database, they added a flag to tag those recruiters interested in veteran students and they also added a flag for veteran students to facilitate easier notification of veteran students about employment opportunities. They have included student veterans on panels during annual Recruiter Training and during Advisory Council meetings. They have marketed existing programs, including a National Security Panel, specifically to veteran students.

In the past year, the staff of the Texas A&M Career Center had more than 350 advising contacts with student veterans. In addition, student veterans had more than 400 interviews on campus through the Texas A&M Career Center last year. Finally, more than 200 student veterans have accessed their online recruiting system, "HireAggies," since the beginning of the fall 2013 semester.

In February 2014, the Student Government Vice President for Veterans Affairs will host OPERATION VET SUCCESS; the 1st Annual Texas A&M Student Veteran Career Fair. The mission of this event is to improve or build student veterans career preparation skills through the use of a national career fair, workshops, and keynote speakers by providing the opportunity to network with national veteran support organizations and veterans enrolled in higher education from across the country. The Texas A&M Career Center has been instrumental in the development of this event.

The VRSC has established close ties with the local office of both the Texas Workforce Commission and the Texas Veterans Commission. We frequently refer students to these offices for employment and other assistance. Periodically, the VRSC has invited both TVC and TWC employees to campus to meet with students. The VRSC used social media to advertise the "office hours" and provided office space for these meetings. Representatives from the Texas Veterans Leadership Program have used a similar arrangement to provide "one-on-one" resume reviews.

The VRSC has partnered with several university departments to explore unique academic, recruiting and employment support. The History Department (through funding by the Texas A&M Association of Former Students) is currently teaching a "Veteran Only" History class to provide student veterans with the opportunity to connect with each other in an academic environment. The VRSC has partnered with Mays Business School and the Construction Science

Department to proactively recruit more veterans to their programs. As the Aggie Veteran Network expands, the VRSC will seek additional partnerships to assist with recruiting and employment support for our student veterans. We are only just now beginning to understand the potential impact that can be realized through our networking and partnerships.

In addition to full time employment assistance, the VRSC also provides student veterans with numerous part time employment opportunities that provide financial support while enrolled in classes. The VRSC maintains lists of local businesses (and other campus departments) that are actively seeking to hire veterans. These employment opportunities are advertised through the student veteran social media channels. The VRSC and the VSO also employ approximately 8 VA work study students on a part time basis to support the activities of both offices.

As the Director of the VRSC, one of my roles is to serve as the co-advisor for the Student Veteran Association (SVA) at Texas A&M. In early 2013, we helped to facilitate the expansion and reorganization of the SVA. The leadership structure was expanded from five to 22 students. One of the new leadership positions is the Student Veteran Employment Liaison Officer. This position is designed to serve as a way for a student SVA leader to help collect information (i.e., job leads), advertise and facilitate employment for other SVA members.

As the VRSC develops new programs for the second year, it is now evident that a student veteran spouse group or network is in high demand. We are currently working with the SVA leaders to determine the structure and focus for this effort. Although the final details are still under development, it will include aspects of family support and resources to include childcare, medical and dental services, marriage enrichment, financial planning, housing, and spouse employment.

In August 2013, Texas A&M welcomed our new “VetSuccess” on Campus (VSOC) VA counselor. This VA funded position provides our students with direct access to the VA. As we develop future plans, we are working to determine the most efficient ways to employ this added resource. Although not directly related to future employment, the VSOC counselor (in a short two months) has already proven to be a superb advocate for our student veterans as she enhances the student’s abilities to receive timely and appropriate VA support. In turn, this helps them focus on their current mission: Academic Success!

In summary, the Texas A&M VRSC is a very new office that is just beginning to explore and fully develop programs to better serve student veterans like James Rowin whom I brought with me today. In his 10 years in the US Marine Corps Reserve, he deployed to Iraq three times and later deployed to the Horn of Africa in a civilian capacity. His wife is a US Army Reserve Officer. Both James and his wife are student veterans at Texas A&M. The Rowin’s exemplify another generation of great Americans who have earned and deserve our support. As our office grows,

we are determined to proactively combine and leverage our networks, programs and resources to develop innovative best practices that enhance the development of our student veterans who have been, and remain, dedicated to serving the greater good.

Thank you again for providing this opportunity for me and Texas A&M to support the efforts to improve programs that directly assist veterans in finding meaningful employment following the completion of their studies.