

**STATEMENT OF
DR. JOSEPH W. WESCOTT
LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE APPROVING AGENCIES
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

April 14, 2016

Introduction

Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano and members of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, I am pleased to appear before you today on behalf of the over fifty-five member state agencies of the National Association of State Approving Agencies (NASAA) and appreciate the opportunity to provide comments on bills pending before this committee. I am accompanied today by our Legislative Committee Vice-Chair and Judge Advocate, Retired Sergeant Major Robert Haley. Given the large number of bills being considered, we will keep our comments brief and focus our testimony on those areas in which we feel we can be of most assistance to this committee.

H.R. 748 GI Bill STEM Extension Act of 2015

The past several years has seen considerable concern regarding a shortage of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) workers to meet the demands of our labor market. As such, NASAA strongly supports the intent of this bill, but recommends that the legislation be amended to clarify those who would qualify for this benefit.

H.R. 2551 Veterans' Entry to Apprenticeship Act.

NASAA supports this bill, particularly as it could serve to increase enrollment in approved apprenticeship programs. However we offer the following recommendations. First, to ensure only quality programs are offered, we believe that approval authority should rest with the State approving agency. This is not specified in the current proposal. Second, specific approval criteria should be developed in addition to those items identified in H.R. 2551 to include: 1) the training establishment offering training must submit to the appropriate State approving agency a written application for approval; 2) there should be a maximum program length of 12 weeks, not to exceed 600 hours; 3) hours should be credited towards total required hours in the apprentice program; and 4) the State approving agency must find that there exists a reasonable certainty that the apprentice program for which the eligible veteran or person is to be trained will be available at the end of the training period. It is important to remember that pre-apprenticeship programs

vary greatly from state to state. It is the State approving agencies, providing that local, “boots on the ground” oversight and supervision that are best positioned to ensure that the intent of Congress is indeed delivered.

H.R. 3286 Hire Vets Act of 2015

NASAA supports this bill and sees in it yet another opportunity to encourage employers to hire veterans. We would also see in this bill an opportunity to highlight or bring attention to the Apprenticeship and On-The-Job training programs which can be approved under the GI Bill. As we testified before this Committee last November, we believe “OJT and Apprenticeship programs under the various chapters of the GI Bill provide a tremendous opportunity to put our Nations veterans back to work immediately in meaningful and rewarding careers that are needed in our economy.”

H.R. 3419 Support for Student Veterans with Families Act of 2015

This proposed legislation would authorize the Department of Veterans Affairs to make up to 50 grants in FY2016 to eligible educational institutions to provide child care services on campus for student veterans. NASAA strongly supports the intent of this bill and we believe it would encourage institutions to provide affordable childcare to veterans enrolled in higher education and support success in their educational program. We would like to see language added to clarify eligibility and implementation.

H.R. 4138 To authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to recoup relocation expenses paid to or on behalf of employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs

NASAA neither supports nor opposes this legislation at this time.

[Discussion Draft] Veterans Success on Campus Act of 2016

NASAA supports this bill. We would like the implementation language modified to specify that resources be shared with or otherwise available to neighboring campuses.

[Discussion Draft] To direct the Secretary of Labor to carry out a research program to evaluate the effectiveness of Transition Assistance Program in addressing needs of certain minority veterans.

NASAA strongly believes that we should attempt to eradicate any barriers to employment or aspirations for any groups of veterans and when possible, that the Transition Assistance Program should be designed to appropriately address the needs of veterans which are substantially different. NASAA supports this bill.

[Discussion Draft] GI Bill Oversight Act of 2016.

NASAA supports this bill but we would like to see the language of the bill expanded to include all schools approved for GI Bill ® benefits by replacing the phrase “institutions of higher learning” with the term “institutions.” This will allow for the inclusion of non-college degree schools. We recommend Section 2 be modified to specify the purpose and scope of the Inspector General Investigation, to add to subsection (b)(2) that students provide to the Inspector General any information that may be relevant to the investigation and to add the requirement that the Inspector General will also notify the appropriate State Approving agency upon commencing an investigation and share their findings. Also, it is critical that State approving agencies retain both approval and disapproval authority. Therefore, we recommend in Section 3 replacing “The Secretary” with “The State approving agency or the Secretary when acting in the absence of the State approving agency.” This change clarifies and codifies that State approving agencies have the primary statutory authority to protect our Veterans and their families from those who would engage in unscrupulous conduct. Further, in Sections 2 and 3, we respectfully suggest that the word “guilty” not be used to describe administrative findings.

[Discussion Draft] A Bill to make certain improvements in the laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs relating to educational assistance, and for other purposes,

NASAA supports Sections 2 through 4, as well as Sections 6 (with reservation) and 7 in their current form. NASAA supports the intent of Section 5, but while we agree that training of school certifying officials should be a requirement, we do not agree that training should solely be the responsibility of the VA. In the past, State approving agencies regularly provided one-on-one, targeted training to certifying officials. Prior to fiscal year 2012, when SAAs began assisting the VA with compliance surveys, State approving agencies conducted supervisory visits at 80%-90% of our active facilities every year. On-site training of SCOs was a core component of these supervisory visits. Now, as a result of conducting compliance surveys on behalf of the VA, we only visit approximately 15% of our active facilities each year. While we provide training to the extent we can in conjunction with compliance surveys, it is clear that the compliance survey assignments have greatly reduced our ability to regularly visit and train certifying officials. We do not think it is unreasonable to conclude that the reduction in on-site training during SAA supervisory visits has played a role in the percentage of GI Bill® overpayments due to certifying official errors, as discussed in the GAO report from October 2015 on Additional Actions Needed to Help Reduce Overpayments and Increase Collections. We believe that working towards a better balance of supervisory visits and compliance survey visits will result in better training and oversight as well as fewer overpayments due to school errors. With that in mind, regarding section 5 of the proposed legislation, we believe that the development of the training recommended in the GAO report should be a collaborative effort between VA and NASAA, with input from school certifying officials. We believe this would help ensure the efficacy of the program. Should the committee choose to move forward with section 5 of the proposed legislation at this time, we would suggest the following modifications. First, in subsection (a), program disapproval authority should primarily reside with the State Approving Agency, as stated above. Second, NASAA recommends limiting any requirement for off-site training to those institutions with more than 20 GI Bill® recipients annually. This will mitigate what could

be perceived as an onerous training requirement for many of the schools with a very small GI Bill® student cohort, which in turn could result in many high-quality programs being withdrawn at the schools' request. However, reasonable and proper online training should be mandatory for all certifying officials.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, today, over fifty-five SAAs, composed of approximately 175 professional and support personnel are supervising over 14,000 active facilities with more than 100,000 programs. We are extremely grateful for the opportunity to once again appear before this committee to share our positions on these important pieces of proposed legislation. We remain committed to working closely with our VA partners, VSO stakeholders and educational institutions on these and other initiatives designed to protect the quality and the integrity of the various GI Bill ® programs and the Veterans and family members who have sacrificed so much for this great Nation. I thank you again for this opportunity and I look forward to answering any questions that you or subcommittee members may have.