

Prepared Statement

of

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Before the

House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity

“Improving the Quality and Timeliness of GI Bill Processing for Student Veterans”

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Good afternoon, Chairman Arrington, Ranking Member O'Rourke, and esteemed members of the Subcommittee. I am pleased to appear before you today to discuss improvements to the quality and timeliness of GI Bill processing for student Veterans.

The Department of Defense (DoD) takes our responsibility for ensuring Veterans have access to their benefits very seriously. Together with our partners from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), we work hard to ensure that accurate information is available to determine a Veteran's eligibility for education benefits. We recognize that the road to becoming a Veteran is always through service in the military. Accurate reporting of that service is vital to the determination of eligibility for all post-service education benefits. DoD has been providing data on member military service to the VA since the enactment of the Montgomery GI Bill in 1985; during this time, a strong and enduring relationship has developed.

For today's hearing, I will focus on the role that DoD plays in providing data to the VA for the Post-9/11 GI Bill, and how our two Departments continue to work together to ensure the successful administration of this program. The strong relationship between DoD and VA benefits Service members, Veterans, and their families.

Since 2003, the Department has been providing automated daily updates of Service member and Veteran personnel data to the VA. From the day someone enlists or is commissioned into the military, DoD sends that person's electronic record to the VA, and we update this information as it changes. Since the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, whenever a Service member elects to transfer educational benefits to a family member, we also include those family members in the VA and DoD Information Repository. This provides the VA with daily updates to approved Service member transfers of this benefit, and allows the VA to administer the related payments.

To assist in resolving questions about a Service member's or Veteran's record, direct lines of communication link the VA Regional Processing Offices with each of the Service Components. This process allows VA claims examiners to get quick updates or clarifications for a Veteran's record of service.

DoD monitors the data reported to the VA to ensure a timely and efficient process for determining eligibility for Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits for members and their families. In keeping with this responsibility, we are focusing on two areas for improvement. The first area involves missing initial training *end* dates, which can be crucial to Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit eligibility in some situations. In August 2009, we added a space on the Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty (the DD 214) to capture the initial training end dates; this information is included in the data exchange from DoD to VA. However, because this information was not captured before 2009, individuals who entered or separated prior to that time may not have the requisite data in their records. We have identified approximately 40,000 Regular Component Veterans with less than 24 months total service time, whose records do not have an Initial Training End Calendar Date. We are currently working to resolve the missing values, with a goal of completing this effort by September 30, 2017. If a Veteran from this population applies for benefits in the interim, we will work with the VA to expedite resolution on a case-by-case basis.

Our second area of focus involves missing qualifying active service segments for Reserve and Guard members. The elimination of the Reserve Education Assistance Program resulted in the transfer of its participants to the Post-9/11 GI Bill, presenting data challenges, which we have subsequently addressed. However, the time lag in updating data requirements resulted in incomplete information on periods of qualifying active service for members of the Reserve and Guard Components from September 11, 2001 to 2011. As a result, the VA claims examiners must work with the their Service counterparts to develop most Reserve and Guard benefit requests manually, to ensure all qualifying periods are captured in determining the final Post-9/11 benefit amount. This manual review creates a burden on the Services in order to report Reserve and Guard eligibility to the VA, and also adds time for VA Claims Examiners to administer the benefit. This affects all Service Veterans and family members applying for their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits.

The Department of Defense is absolutely committed to taking care of Veterans and ensuring the success of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. The Post-9/11 GI Bill will have major impacts on military recruiting and retention, and few areas are more important to us. To address the data shortfall, my office and the Defense Manpower Data Center will meet with each Reserve

Component to develop a plan for significant process improvement to resolve the missing active service data and address data quality issues by the end of the year. Going forward, I will institute a governance structure that includes the VA and other agencies. The governing body will be responsible for improving the quality and timeliness of GI Bill processing for student Veterans.

Mr. Chairman this concludes my statement. I thank you and the members of this Subcommittee for your outstanding and continuing support of our Service members, Veterans, survivors, and their families.