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LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON:

H.R. 95, H.R. 444, H.R. 1718, A DISCUSSION DRAFT "TO AMEND TITLE 38, UNITED STATES CODE, TO MAKE CERTAIN IMPROVEMENTS TO THE EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANT PROGRAMS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS WITH RESPECT TO FLIGHT TRAINING PROGRAMS AND CERTAIN OTHER PROGRAMS OF EDUCATION, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES," A DISCUSSION DRAFT "JUSTICE FOR SERVICEMEMBERS ACT," A DISCUSSION DRAFT "TO AMEND THE UNITED STATES HOUSING ACT OF 1937 AND TITLE 38, UNITED STATES CODE, TO EXPAND ELIGIBILITY FOR THE HUD-VASH PROGRAM, TO DIRECT THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS TO SUBMIT ANNUAL REPORTS TO THE COMMITTEES ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS OF THE SENATE AND HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES REGARDING HOMELESS VETERANS, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES," A DISCUSSION DRAFT "HOMES FOR OUR HEROES ACT OF 2019," A DISCUSSION DRAFT "VETERAN EMPLOYMENT AND CHILD CARE ACCESS ACT," A DISCUSSION DRAFT "BRAVE ACT," A DISCUSSION DRAFT "TO CLARIFY SEASONING REQUIREMENTS FOR CERTAIN REFINANCED MORTGAGE LOANS, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES," A DISCUSSION DRAFT "NAVY SEAL CHIEF PETTY OFFICER WILLIAM 'BILL' MULDER (RET.) TRANSITION IMPROVEMENT ACT," A DISCUSSION DRAFT "VET OPP ACT," A DISCUSSION DRAFT "TO AMEND TITLE 38, UNITED STATES CODE, TO ADJUST CERTAIN LIMITS ON THE GUARANTEED AMOUNT OF A HOME LOAN UNDER THE HOME LOAN PROGRAM OF THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES," A DISCUSSION DRAFT "TO AMEND TITLE 38, UNITED STATES CODE, TO MAKE CERTAIN IMPROVEMENTS TO THE EDITH NOURSE ROGERS STEM SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM OF THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS," A DISCUSSION DRAFT "TO AMEND TITLE 38, UNITED STATES CODE, TO EXPAND ELIGIBILITY FOR THE MARINE GUNNERY SERGEANT JOHN DAVID FRY SCHOLARSHIP TO CHILDREN AND SPOUSES OF CERTAIN MEMBERS OF THE RESERVE COMPONENTS OF THE ARMED FORCES WHO DIE FROM SERVICE-CONNECTED DISABILITIES, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES," A DISCUSSION DRAFT "TO AMEND TITLE 38, UNITED STATES CODE, TO IMPROVE THE ABILITY OF VETERANS TO RECEIVE IN-STATE TUITION USING EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANCE ADMINISTERED BY THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS."

Tuesday, April 9, 2019
House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Washington, D.C.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:00 a.m., in Room 1334, Longworth House Office Building, Hon. Mike Levin [chairman of the subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Levin, Rice, Pappas, Luria, Lee, Cunningham, Bilirakis, Banks, and Barr.

Mr. *Levin.* Good morning. I call this legislative hearing to order.

Welcome to the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity's first hearing of the 116th Congress. It is exciting to be with you. Before I touch on the legislative business before us today, I would like to take a moment to speak about the work our subcommittee will be addressing this Congress.

I represent the 49th Congressional District of California. As many of you know, my district and Southern California as a whole is ground zero for many of the national issues facing our veterans; that is why I am thankful for the trust my colleagues have placed in me to serve as chair. This subcommittee plans to address issues like veterans' homelessness, predatory educational institutions, and ensuring that our veterans successfully transition from the military to careers that take advantage of their unique and valuable skill sets.

That last point is of particular importance to me. We must be sure that our veterans aren't just getting a piece of paper, but a real plan of transition to civilian life.

There are over 46,000 veterans in the district I

represent, veterans that depend on the services they earned in proud service to our country. Chair Takano has given our committee a great goal with his VA 2030 vision, and it will be the duty of this subcommittee to identify and carry out the objectives within our jurisdiction. I plan to make this subcommittee a bipartisan and collaborative body, and I encourage my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to share with me their thoughts and concerns. That brings me to the work before us today.

Today, we are holding the first legislative hearing for the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs in the 116th Congress. We will consider 16 pieces of legislation, including a discussion draft of my legislation, the Navy SEAL Chief Petty Officer William "Bill" Mulder Transition Improvement Act. I look forward to introducing this bill with my colleague from Texas, Mr. Arrington, who was a friend of Mr. Mulder's and represents his home district.

This bipartisan legislation will modernize how we assist servicemen and women as they transition to civilian life by placing a focus on what a career really means. The bill will better allow the Department of Labor and the VA to track

veteran employment, evaluate the effectiveness of the Transition Assistance Program, and set up a pilot program to create up to five new job training locations that will be independent from traditional military installations. These new sites will test the viability of giving servicemen and women the ability to train for jobs in new settings that better reflect the challenges they may face in civilian life.

I also am pleased to serve as cosponsor on six other pieces of legislation being considered today, including the VET OPP Act. This legislation will elevate veterans' education, job training, and transition assistance programs by creating a new Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration at the VA.

Two of today's bills address the HUD-VASH program, which is crucial for housing veterans across the country, including those in San Diego, a city that ranks fourth nationwide in homeless residents. The Homes for Our Heroes Act will require transparency in the allocation of HUD-VASH vouchers and case management services, as well as direct the VA to complete a study identifying best practices for the program in high-cost areas. And the Veterans' House Act will expand

voucher eligibility to veterans that were discharged under other than honorable conditions or served less than 24 months.

Given that the issue of veteran homelessness is especially severe in Southern California, I am pleased to collaborate with another member from the San Diego delegation, my friend Mr. Peters, on both of these bills.

I am proud of the work we are doing here today and I am especially proud of the way we are doing it, in a bipartisan manner.

And, in closing, I would like to thank our witnesses for appearing and I look forward to your testimony.

[The statement of Hon. Mike Levin appears on p.]

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Mr. *Levin.* With that, I would like to recognize my friend Ranking Member Bilirakis for 5 minutes for any opening remarks that he may wish to make.

Mr. *Bilirakis.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you so very much.

Again, before I begin my comments on the bills before us today, I want to welcome you, Mr. Chairman, and the new members to this subcommittee. It is my honor to serve as the ranking member and I look forward to working with you, all the members to continue this subcommittee's strong record, as you said, of bipartisan accomplishment for veterans, and this committee, the full committee as well have been extremely bipartisan and that is why we are getting things done for our heroes. So I appreciate it very much. I know you are going to do a great job; I look forward to working with you.

Mr. Chairman, it has been a pleasure, again, to get to know you since the Congress began, and it is clear to me that you understand what it means to serve on this committee, a very important committee. I look forward to working together to improve economic opportunities for our veterans.

I also want to thank all the witnesses for joining us

here today to discuss these pieces of legislation pending before the subcommittee with the intention of benefitting the lives of our servicemembers, our veterans, and their families.

The bills brought forth by our colleagues today would improve the service and economic opportunities for our veterans, and also would make changes to the GI Bill to expand benefits and close a loophole related to flight training. It also would strengthen the work we did last Congress to improve the Transition Assistance Program; also would make necessary reforms to the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program; and many other worthwhile policy changes.

I am interested in hearing from our witnesses about their own views on the legislation before us, but I wanted to briefly discuss the bill on the agenda that I am going to introduce with Chairman Levin. My bill, the Fry Scholarship Improvement Act, would expand eligibility for the Fry Scholarship to certain survivors of members of the National Guard and Reserve. The Fry Scholarship provides post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to surviving spouses and dependent children of

servicemembers who have died while on active duty.

While this benefit has provided millions of dollars to eligible survivors, I am concerned that certain current eligibility rules have left out deserving survivors from the Guard and Reserve component.

To address this issue, my bill will expand eligibility for the Fry Scholarship to survivors of servicemembers who are serving in the National Guard and Reserve and who die of a service-connected injury, but whose death did not occur while they were on active duty orders.

On our panel today, we will hear from Ms. Haycock-- welcome--with TAPS about several tragic situations where a member of the National Guard or Reserve's death was determined to be service-connected, but their survivors were ineligible for the Fry Scholarship because they were not on active duty orders when they died, and this is an injustice we are going to correct.

In one case, if the servicemember's death had occurred even just a few hours sooner, the survivors would have been eligible for the generous Fry Scholarship. We should not let a few hours and some would say chance determine eligibility

for this great benefit. If a death is service-connected and the servicemember is still serving our country in the Guard or Reserve, then I believe their family should be covered, and the chairman agrees with me. I appreciate TAPS bringing this inequity to my attention and am proud to work with the chairman on this legislation, and the entire committee.

I know that VA has some technical questions with how the bill is drafted and I pledge to address those issues as we move forward.

I would also like to express my support for H.R. 2045, VET OPP Act, which would create a new fourth administration at VA. We saw all too well the impact the difficulties with the implementation of the Forever GI Bill had on student veterans last fall. From this experience, it is clear now more than ever before that more focus on programs that promote economic opportunities are needed.

I applaud our colleague Dr. Wenstrup and the chairman for introducing this bill, and it has my full support.

I am also supportive of draft bills on today's agenda that would make changes to in-state tuition rules for veterans, also would ensure the STEM scholarship program in

the Forever GI Bill can be used by student veterans, and would close a loophole related to GI Bill tuition and fee payments for flight training at schools, public schools.

Again, these bills have a real impact on our veterans and we have had a real success rate, Mr. Chairman, over the last few years working in a bipartisan manner, and get these bills through and signed by the President as soon as possible. So I look forward to discussing all of the bills before us today and to hearing from distinguished witnesses.

With that, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back the balance of my time, if I have any. Thank you.

[The statement of Hon. Gus Bilirakis appears on p.]

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Mr. *Levin.* Thank you, Mr. Ranking Member. I am really excited to work with you in that spirit of bipartisan collaboration and I think we are going to get a lot done.

Mr. *Bilirakis.* Thank you.

Mr. *Levin.* We have a really great panel joining us today and I would like to just briefly introduce all of you, and I will go from one end to the other.

I see Ms. Rebecca Burgess, Program Manager at the American Enterprise Institute. Thanks for being with us.

Under Secretary Margarita Devlin, the Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Benefits at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. There you are--oops, I got you out of order.

Ms. Ashlynn Haycock, Deputy Policy Director for TAPS, the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors. Thank you so much for being here.

Mr. Patrick Murray, who is here as the Executive Director of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Hello, Patrick.

Mr. John Kamin, Executive Director at The American Legion.

I am grateful to all five of you for being here this

morning.

And with that I now recognize our Under Secretary,
Margarita Devlin, for 5 minutes.

STATEMENTS OF MARGARITA DEVLIN, PRINCIPAL DEPUTY UNDER SECRETARY FOR BENEFITS, VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS; REBECCA BURGESS, PROGRAM MANAGER, CITIZENSHIP PROJECT, ON BEHALF OF AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE; ASHLYNNE HAYCOCK, DEPUTY POLICY DIRECTOR, EDUCATION SUPPORT SERVICES, TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS (TAPS); JOHN KAMIN, CREDENTIALING AND EDUCATION POLICY ASSOCIATE, NATIONAL VETERANS EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION DIVISION, ON BEHALF OF THE AMERICAN LEGION; AND, PATRICK MURRAY, DEPUTY DIRECTOR, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE SERVICE, THE VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS

STATEMENT OF MARGARITA DEVLIN

Ms. *Devlin.* Good morning, Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, and distinguished members of the subcommittee. I am pleased to be here today to provide views for the Department of Veterans Affairs on pending legislation impacting programs at the Veterans Benefits Administration, or VBA.

Also on today's agenda are bills impacting the Veterans Health Administration; any questions related to those bills I

will take for the record.

Since I am limited to 5 minutes for this statement, I will provide a high-level overview of VBA's bills, which I am happy to discuss in greater detail during the question-and-answer.

VBA's Office of Transition and Economic Development, or TED, is the business line and side of VBA responsible for administering VA's Interagency Transition Assistance Program, the VA portion, or TAP. TED is embarking on a cohort-based study to gain information and insights on the outcomes of TAP; in fact, the survey was just approved by OMB last week. We believe this study will meet the intent of two of the sections of the bill.

We do support the provision which will allow us to access the National Directory of New Hires to help VA understand and better track employment outcomes for veterans. And we appreciate, as always, the subcommittee's interest in easing the transition from military to civilian status.

VBA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program, or VETERANS AFFAIRS&E, works with veterans with service-connected disabilities and an employment handicap to help

them obtain and maintain suitable employment.

Two of the draft bills would impact the VETERANS AFFAIRS&E Program; one provides child care assistance to veteran participants, which is a benefit that VETERANS AFFAIRS&E already provides through existing regulatory authority; the other bill removes the program's 12-year eligibility period. In 2017, the passage of the Forever GI Bill made a similar change to the Post-9/11 GI Bill, removing the eligibility period for veterans discharged or released from active duty on or after January 1st, 2013.

While VA supports the intent of the draft VETERANS AFFAIRS&E bill, we suggest the bill incorporate the January 1st, 2013 discharge or release date to create parity between the VETERANS AFFAIRS&E and Post- 9/11 GI Bill programs.

Five draft bills on today's agenda impact our education program, including improvements for flight training programs and the STEM Scholarship program; expanded eligibility for the Fry Scholarship; expanded ability for tuition and fee charges to be equivalent to those for residents of each state; and clarification regarding transfer of entitlement of Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to children.

VA supports the intent of these bills, but we do have some technical concerns and want to ensure the text is written to capture the improvements Congress intended. For example, the flight training bill removes the requirement to meet on the day flight training begins the medical requirements necessary for a commercial pilot certificate.

Our partners at the Veterans Service Organizations have raised concerns to us that meeting the medical requirements prior to entering the program is a barrier to entry; however, VA sees this as in the best interests of veteran outcomes, because it supports the veteran pursuing degrees they will be able to use in the workforce. If a veteran were to begin or complete a flight training program and then not pass the medical exam necessary for a commercial pilot certificate, the veteran would be unable to work as a commercial pilot, thereby having used their benefits for a purpose that doesn't lead to employment. If the medical exam remains required prior to program approval, the veteran would not be subjected to this unfortunate outcome.

We look forward to continuing to work with our VSO partners and the subcommittee to ensure that this draft bill

and others impacting education benefits are producing positive outcomes for veterans and their families.

VBA's loan guaranty program would be impacted by two bills on the agenda. VA does not oppose the bill that clarifies seasoning requirements for the refinanced homes, as this is a straightforward technical fix. The bill containing the provision to remove the effective loan limits on VA-guaranteed loans is more complex and I can discuss this in greater detail, although ultimately, given the uncertainty of the budgetary impacts, VA cannot support this section of the legislation at this time. However, the other sections the VA does not oppose; one aligns the current loan limit for Native Americans direct loans with the VA Guaranteed Loan Program, the other waives funding fees for members of the Armed Forces serving on active duty who were awarded the Purple Heart.

The last bill, the VET OPP Act, would establish a separate administration responsible for VETERANS AFFAIRS&E education, home loans, TAP, and verification of small businesses owned and operated by veterans. VA does appreciate the committee's focus on improving services and benefits offered by these programs, but we do not support

this bill.

In 2018, VBA completed organizational restructuring by de-layering oversight offices and concentrating resources on veteran-facing positions. Additionally, with the creation of TED, we prioritized transition services not just operationally, but also in our budget. The current structure generates efficiencies from close collaboration between VBA program offices and appropriately reflects the Under Secretary's overall responsibility for veteran benefit programs.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, for the opportunity to present our views on these bills. This concludes my testimony and I look forward to answering any of your questions.

[The statement of Margarita Devlin appears on p.]

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Mr. *Levin.* Thank you, Under Secretary Devlin, and perfect timing.

Without objection, to the extent that any of the witnesses' full testimony is not given, we will add their statements to the record.

With that, I now recognize Ms. Haycock for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF ASHLYNNE HAYCOCK

Ms. *Haycock.* Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and distinguished committee members, thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the 85,000 surviving families of our Nation's heroes that TAPS represents.

I am the surviving daughter of Army Sergeant First Class Jeffrey Haycock, who died in the line of duty in 2002, and Air Force Veteran Nicole Haycock, who died by suicide in 2011. In 2010, I was one of the very first recipients of the Marine Gunnery Sergeant John Fry Scholarship and for that opportunity I am incredibly grateful to this committee.

TAPS would like to thank the committee for all of the provision in the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Education Assistance Act of 2017 that assisted our surviving families, such as Yellow Ribbon for Fry Scholarship recipients, the removal of the delimiting date for Fry eligible spouses, and an increase in Chapter 35 benefits.

This year, though, we are excited to see one of our long-term priorities before this committee, providing parity for surviving children and spouses of those whose loved ones

while serving in the Guard and Reserve. Their service and sacrifice are no different than those who died while on active duty and, while almost all other benefits are equal for those survivors, the education benefits are not. It is time to make sure those survivors have the same access to the Fry Scholarship as their active duty counterparts. TAPS estimates between 1,000 and 1,500 surviving spouses and children will benefit from these changes.

Some of the stories TAPS has heard are absolutely heartbreaking, such as the story of First Sergeant John DuPont, who served his country honorably for over 30 years, starting in the Marine Corps and then the Army National Guard. During his National Guard service, he was deployed multiple times. Upon his return, he continued with the National Guard, and lost his battle with PTSD and completed suicide in 2011. He had just returned home from his drill weekend only hours before, where he learned he was deploying again in a few months' time. Had he died a few hours earlier, his children would have been eligible for the Fry Scholarship, but because he made it all the way home he is not considered active duty for Fry Scholarship eligibility.

Then there is the story of Sergeant Anthony Tipps, who was a member of the Texas National Guard. Sergeant Tipps was activated in 2009 and had to leave his career for a deployment to Iraq. When he returned a year later, his career was no longer waiting for him. He died by suicide less than three months after returning from Iraq and, because of his duty status at the time, his daughter Brittany is not eligible for the Fry Scholarship even though his death was service-connected.

Finally, you have the story of Colonel David McCracken, who served honorably in the Army and Army Reserves for over 20 years. During his military career, he was deployed multiple times. During his last tour, he was activated as a Reservist, where he developed headaches. Upon return from his deployment, he was diagnosed with brain cancer, which was found to be service-connected because of the link to burn pits in Iraq. He was not on active duty orders, nor training at the time of his death due to his illness, so his children are not eligible for the Fry Scholarship.

These are just three of the stories TAPS has heard with families who do not have eligibility for Fry Scholarship due

to duty status at the exact moment of death. In the case of First Sergeant DuPont, literally hours differentiate what benefits his children receive. The families have no say in the duty status of the servicemember; therefore, they should not be treated differently.

Six months ago, I spoke with former Congressman Chet Edwards, who wrote and introduced the original Fry Scholarship in 2009. When I told him of this issue, he was stunned, because his original intent was to include all of these families and he had no idea that these families were being excluded. He has offered his support in fixing this as well.

While access to the Fry Scholarship for Guard and Reserve survivors is our largest priority in this hearing, we would also like to express our support for the creation of a fourth administration under the Department of Veterans Affairs. After the complicated implementation of the Forever GI Bill, we see this as a much-needed change in order to prioritize education benefits in the VA.

We would also like to make a recommendation to include Chapter 35 recipients in the in-state tuition bill. Chapter

35 recipients are often forgotten from legislation and, even with the \$200 increase provided by the Forever GI Bill, it is still not even comparable with the Montgomery GI Bill. If we are going to do in-state tuition across the board, let's make sure we include those whose benefits are not enough to cover tuition at a state school, let alone out-of-state tuition. Since the financial burden for in-state tuition falls on the states, we see this as an easy fix.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

[The statement of Ashlynn Haycock appears on p.]

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Mr. *Levin.* Thank you for your testimony, Ms. Haycock.

I now recognize Mr. Murray for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF PATRICK MURRAY

Mr. *Murray.* Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, members of the subcommittee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States and its Auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to present our views on legislation being considered today.

For far too many years, homeless veterans have been a regular sight on our Nation's streets. Ending veteran homelessness is an attainable goal and some of these bills will go a long way in doing just that.

Veterans with dependent children face diverse burdens with access to homeless benefits. Providing child care for homeless veterans so they can seek care and services while at VA is an incredibly powerful tool to help these veterans in need. And providing additional per diem for the children of homeless veterans in the Grant and Per Diem Program would expand housing options for these veterans.

The HUD-VA Supporting Housing Program is another critical benefit for veterans facing homelessness. While we see the great value in this program, we would like to see the

benefit enhanced, so that veterans can be sure they will be housed in safe and secure areas. Additionally, we agree that HUD-VASH eligibility should be expanded to veterans with other than honorable discharges. Veterans with OTH discharge are at a higher risk of dying by suicide and experience higher rates for homelessness than those who receive an honorable discharge. The VFW supports this provision, which would rightfully ensure OTH veterans have access to the HUD-VASH Program.

One key area of improvement that could affect servicemember is transition; it is the linchpin that could prevent negative outcomes such as unemployment, homelessness, and veterans with mental health conditions having to cope without proper treatment. Transition is an example of where veteran groups are the subject matter experts more so than anybody else.

Every single servicemember has to transition at some point, so it is a shared experience that we have all gone through. We are the military alumni and we think of our collective experience and feedback as invaluable when making reforms to the transition process. The VFW offers claims

assistance to transitioning servicemembers as they prepare to move into civilian life.

Since 2015, our Benefits Delivery at Discharge Service, or BDD, has worked with men and women transitioning out to make sure they are well prepared for civilian life. Each servicemember who goes to our offices is asked to complete a survey on their entire transition experience. We have thousands of responses and a phrase I have seen repeated over and over is "drinking from a fire hose." Veterans have also stated in surveys numerous times they wish they could go back and revisit the TAP class over again. This is why VFW has called for the reintroduction of the Off-Base TAP Pilot Program, in order to provide centralized TAP-style classes to veterans after they separate into civilian life.

We also think that formally adding to the curriculum groups that specialize in community networking is a valuable tool to enhance TAP. Connecting servicemembers to resources in the communities where they are relocating to is an important step that should happen during the TAP classes. Providing these connections to organizations that offer employment training, educational information, financial or

legal assistance, is beneficial in a seamless transition and must be part of the formal TAP class, so servicemembers can begin to make these connections before they separate and not afterwards.

Lastly, I would like to speak about our support for the fourth administration within VA. Currently, the Economic Opportunity programs are contained within the Veteran Benefits Administration. Compensation, being the largest program, dominates a significant amount of attention within VBA and it makes it difficult for EO programs to get adequate attention, specialized resources, and other prioritization. For example, when the VBA has been focused on the modernization and streamlining of the claims and appeals process, we feel other important programs such as VETERANS AFFAIRS&E have seen a stagnation of resources and oversight.

This Nation should have as much focus on the economic opportunities of our veterans as it does their health and benefits. The vast majority of veterans are looking for gainful employment and/or education, and we feel that Congress should recognize the value of these programs by separating them into their own administration, focused solely

on their utilization and improvement.

The VFW supports this proposal to separate from VBA all programs currently under the EO jurisdiction, create a fourth admin within VA with its own Under Secretary whose sole responsibility is EO programs. This new Under Secretary for EO would refocus resources, provide a champion for these programs, and provide a central point of contact for VSOs, other Federal departments, and Congress.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. Again, the VFW thanks you and the ranking member for the opportunity to testify on these important issues before the subcommittee, and I am prepared to take any questions you might have.

[The statement of Patrick Murray appears on p.]

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Mr. *Levin.* Thank you, Mr. Murray, for your testimony.

I now recognize Mr. Kamin for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF JOHN KAMIN

Mr. *Kamin.* Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, on behalf of National Commander Brett P. Reistad and the nearly two million members of The American Legion, we thank you for the opportunity to testify in the subcommittee's first hearing of the 116th session of Congress.

The 115th Congress was very productive in passing veterans legislation, and the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity made their mark in history by shepherding in the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Education Assistance Act. Former subcommittee chairman Jody Arrington and Ranking Member Beto O'Rourke presented a rock-solid team that cut through political lines. With Dr. Phil Roe and Mark Takano overseeing the committee, we have come to expect nothing less. Mr. Chairman, we welcome your leadership in this island of bipartisanship. And, Ranking Member Bilirakis, we are so happy for your steadfast support and leadership.

Due to the allotted time available, I will limit my remarks to the discussion drafts on Justice for

Servicemembers Act, Transition Improvement Act, and conclude with saved rounds on the GI Bill.

The Justice for Servicemembers Act is a bill that strengthens the Uniformed Service Employment and Reemployment Rights Act by deeming forced arbitration motions unenforceable for the purpose of wrongful termination complaints. Employment law is complex, but the case of Marine Corps Colonel Michael T. Garrett simplifies this.

With an active duty mobilization pending, Colonel Garrett's employer allegedly terminated his employment to avoid the inconvenience of having to replace him temporarily. In accordance with Section 4323 and enforcement rights with respect to a private employer, Colonel Garrett filed a USERRA violation in District Court. His employer filed a motion to compel forced arbitration. After much dispute, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit ruled that USERRA is not a clear expression of congressional intent concerning the arbitration of servicemembers' employment disputes; thus, the Garrett precedent was established on USERRA violations, and hence we ask for your support on the Justice for Servicemembers Act.

I would be remiss not to inform you of a sobering reality. This same language as this Justice for Servicemembers has been introduced in no less than six sessions of Congress dating back to 2008, all without passage. Let's not wait another session.

The next bill we would like to discuss is the Navy SEAL Chief Petty Officer William Mulder Transition Improvement Act. This bill marks a strong improvement of TAP, the largest reorganization of which since 2011. Notable is its authorization of a 5-year pilot program that would provide matching grant funds to community providers that offer wraparound transition services to veterans and servicemembers.

The necessity for this provision is consistent with a key discovery from our Employment Innovation Task Force, which conducted a survey of 550 exiting active duty servicemembers over the summer of 2018. When asked about if TAP helped me identify community resources for ongoing support beyond transition, only 16 percent agreed or strongly disagreed; this is a wake-up call.

Additionally, we are pleased to see that language from

last sessions H.R. 4835 has been included in this bill. In 2012, The American Legion helped to push the Off-Base Transition Training Pilot Program that would extend the TAP programs to veterans and their spouses in a community-based setting. Overall course ratings by participants were high; however, the pilot program expired in January 2015 and we look forward to see it relaunched.

Finally, The American Legion supports all seven bills on the docket today concerning the Post-9/11 GI Bill and Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program, but we implore the subcommittee to understand that the complications with implementation of the Forever GI Bill are not of the past, they are of the here and now.

In 2018, the VA faithfully attempted to meet the Forever GI Bill deadlines. Congress and VSOs attempted to provide sound oversight and support to ensure this outcome, but we failed, and thousands of veterans paid the price in delayed GI Bill payments this past fall semester.

In November, Secretary Wilkie officially named Under Secretary for Benefits Dr. Paul R. Lawrence as the official responsible for implementing the Forever GI Bill, and we are

encouraged by improved outreach and communication on GI Bill implementation, but it is incumbent upon all of us to take ownership in this success and support Dr. Lawrence in this endeavor, because we have lost the right to disbelief in the event of another GI Bill backlog. Oversight and support must be in real time and practical no matter the challenge. That means being transparent about complications and forthright on changes, open to school inputs and adaptive to recommendations; this starts with trust. The American Legion for one will not abide the implementation of the bill which bears our past National Commander's name to be synonymous with VA failure. The new deadline for implementation is December 2019, let's get to work.

The Legion appreciates the opportunity to comment on the bills being considered by the subcommittee, and I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

Thank you.

[The statement of John Kamin appears on p.]

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Mr. *Levin.* Thank you for your testimony, Mr. Kamin.

Finally, I now recognize Ms. Burgess for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF REBECCA BURGESS

Ms. *Burgess.* Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear here today. It is an honor.

Caring for veterans' well-being has been the genuine concern following every armed conflict in the United States; recognizing how the Nation ought to deliver that care has simultaneously been its most consistent challenge.

American's veterans face three significant challenges in their post-service transition: procuring employment, accessing the education or training associated with civilian occupations, and overcoming the broken veteran narrative.

Veterans' transition stress is often mischaracterized as a grave mental health disorder, feeding the broken veteran narrative. Legislation geared only towards veterans suicide unconsciously perpetuates this image with the best intentions. But reformulating veteran legislation in the positive language of economic opportunity emphasizes post-service growth in a whole-of-health model. Congress can

instigate this through creating a fourth Veterans Economic Opportunity Administration with a dedicated under secretary, as highlighted by the VET OPP. This would benefit veterans, but also the VA, Congress, and the American taxpayer.

At the American Enterprise Institute, we work to present solutions with teeth in them to improve the lives of flesh-and-blood human beings. Here is what we see: the American public respects the military and those who serve in the aggregate, but they don't know anything about them. They call veterans heroes, but believe they are broken. Even the best-intentioned employers and educators labor under the false impression that veterans are not experienced and educated candidates, that veterans do not pursue a college degree or vocational training, or that veterans don't have successful careers after the military.

VA remains the Nation's most prominent recognition of military service, and the millions who qualify for VA health or other benefits drive the public narrative about former soldiers. That dynamic translates to the public assuming that VA serves any veteran and that every veteran is in need of those services. Over time, this has adversely constructed

a veteran-as-deficit model that is particularly damaging to veterans themselves.

For over a century, VA has delivered financial benefits or pensions to veterans calculated from the premise that the injured veteran will never enter the economy again. Despite broad innovations that have shifted our economy from an industrial age to an information age model, VA continues to think in industrial age terms about especially injured and disabled veterans. As society enlarges its definition of disability, VA has grown haphazardly to be the second-largest Federal agency with VBA making VA's largest financial outlays.

The increase of high disability awardees seems entirely warranted, but the current disability schedule is also problematic, as it appears to disincentive veterans from entering the workforce or engaging in society. The levels of veterans' sense of social isolation, not to mention rates of suicide, are unacceptable outcomes for this policy model. VA's failure to measure its program outcomes hampers its ability to service veterans. As recent congressional hearings over VA's bungled implementation for just the GI

Bill shows, it directly hurts veterans, and contributes to young men and women deciding against joining the military and against being under the VA's care in the future.

This is a terribly worrisome cycle, but we have a historic opportunity to harness the power of congressional legislation to reshape the veteran narrative. By rethinking the ability VA has to be an active partner with Congress, and understanding veterans as investments to be leveraged towards greater individual growth with positive societal impact, the proposed VET OPP Act champions the veterans-as-asset model. The VET OPP Act champions the pathway to success for post-service veterans, because VA's suite of educational assistance, VETERANS AFFAIRS&E, and career counseling programs make accessible the tools veterans need to progress from war to work, but these are currently pushed toward the bottom of the program pyramid within VBA.

With VBA's energies continually directed towards its backlog of hundreds of thousands of disability claims, its institutional resources are concentrated on the disability system to the neglect of its education and economic programs. Two small examples. In only 10 years, VA has failed five

times to implement the GI Bill; second, if you visit VA's Office of Employment and Economic Impact website within VBA, it tells you it is no longer available.

This systemic reason is why we consistently see VA's failure to implement congressionally-mandated programs, no matter who sits in the White House. Coincidentally, a majority of veterans report that their top challenge in transitioning to civilian life is navigating VA's administrations and benefits.

In the 21st century information age, education is key to employment, and employment is the door to a successful transition to civilian life. Education and employment combined give veterans the crucial tools to reforge civilian identities. The psychic rewards of work, productivity, and a career cannot be underestimated, which is corroborated by the true veteran narrative. Veterans, it turns out, are immensely successful. Empirical data shore that up by showing how veterans with increased level of education are wealthier, healthier, and more civically engaged than even their civilian peers. This is the veteran narrative that should predominate and the VET OPP Act can trigger this

shift.

VA's economic opportunity programs are truly different in kind from the other operations VBA manages. Separating out management of these programs honors that difference and creates greater accountability, attention, and leadership over what could be the Nation's most important instrument in partnering with veterans in their civilian success. An outdated agency model shouldn't be allowed to prevent veterans from investing their talent and ability in the American economy. This matters. Veterans are the unacknowledged permanent ambassadors of military service; they are assets.

Thank you.

[The statement of Rebecca Burgess appears on p.]

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Mr. *Levin.* Thank you, Ms. Burgess. I appreciate your testimony this morning.

With that, we will begin the question portion of the hearing, and I recognize myself for 5 minutes.

Mr. Murray, Mr. Kamin, and Ms. Burgess, questions generally directed at any of the three of you. I appreciated hearing today's testimony on the VET OPP Act and I am proud to be the Democratic lead of this Congress, picking up the torch from Chair Takano.

I think it is clear that economic opportunity-related business lines need an advocate at the Under Secretary level to push forward decisions, funding, and IT system modernization. However, I also believe we shouldn't rush into massive change without proper planning. I want to understand how VA will divide up personnel and office space should this bill become law; change personnel structure; and ensure IT systems are modernized and continue to communicate across agencies.

So, Mr. Murray, Mr. Kamin, and Ms. Burgess, what are some of the top issues you believe VA should be reporting its plan for should it be directed to create a fourth

administration?

Mr. *Murray.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We feel that it is not going to be an over-bureaucracy issue. There are already people that cover these issues, we are just going to separate them out into a different authority. There will probably be some additional personnel needed, but this isn't going to become some burdensome, you know, new buildings, hundreds, thousands new employees, things like that. They are already doing the work, it is just they are not represented with a seat at the table as much as we feel they should be.

Mr. *Levin.* Mr. Kamin or Ms. Burgess?

Mr. *Kamin.* Yes, I would just first like to go on the record as saying The American Legion is studying this issue very closely and we currently don't have a position on it. That being said, we share the chairman's foresight that this shouldn't be done in haste, that whatever decision is made is done with careful planning, and we know with implementation of the Forever GI Bill that that is the foremost challenge.

That being said, the VET OPP's implementation date, I believe, is October 2020 for that fiscal year, so we don't

see any incongruence there that would hamper that implementation. But, again, The American Legion is still studying the issue.

Ms. *Burgess.* And I would say that our interest in this is not to grow bureaucracy, it is to streamline really how to deliver the benefits, and that is what the point of this is. And we also are studying VA as a whole to see where program overlap happens and where we can actually simplifying and take these out.

Thank you.

Mr. *Levin.* I would like to, if I might, switch gears and talk for a minute about the Bill Mulder Transition Improvement Act. To the entire panel, I appreciate the support you have offered for this legislation. Transition is clearly a priority for everyone on the subcommittee and this bill is the start of our work this Congress, but the issue is something we are going to continue to work on. As I mentioned earlier, the bill would create a pilot program to establish sites where veterans and spouses might access transition training at locations other than military installations.

My question is open to the entire panel. Could you explain the importance of an off-base transition program or transition programs to reaching veterans who have already separated from the military? A question for any of you.

Mr. *Murray.* Mr. Chairman, it is something that we hear time and time again that folks while they were still wearing the uniform maybe didn't recognize the value of the TAP class. Like I said, drinking from a fire hose, it was just too much to take for one week. Once they take off the uniform and they are back in their community, they recognize the issues that are facing them that they might not have known at the time while they were still in service.

Having a centralized place where the Department of Labor, VA, SBA, can come and give them, you know, a one-stop-shop class is important. Once they take off the uniform, then they recognize the challenges that they might not have known, you know, 3 months ago, a year ago, whatever it might be.

Mr. *Levin.* Anybody else care to comment?

Ms. *Burgess.* Mr. Chairman, research shows that consistently pre-leaving the service veterans don't think

that they will need soft skills, but immediately afterwards both employers and veterans recognize that they need soft communication skills especially, and therefore they need some type of a better transition.

Mr. *Levin.* I would also ask, what do you think our next steps should be? Specifically, what part of transition needs the most attention and should be addressed as part of this bill, or the next transition-focused legislation that our subcommittee should take up?

Again, open to anyone.

Ms. *Devlin.* Thank you for the question. I would suggest that our study that we are about to embark on will give us a lot of information about how veterans feel about the transition program.

One of the challenges we typically face with questions such as these is we rely on our own judgment and experience, I think we should rely on the experiences of those veterans who have recently transitioned. The study we will be undertaking will ask veterans, will survey veterans at 6 months post-transition, 1 year post-transition, and 3 years post-transition; it will be a cohort-based study for 5 years.

Why is this important? Because when I went out to military bases and I talked to servicemembers who were about to transition, they had no idea what they were about to embark on. You can train them all you want, you can teach them about their benefits, but it is not until the reality hits and they are on the other side of the DD-214 that it really sinks in, and that is when they realize what they really need. This survey will help us understand what those experiences are post-transition, so that we can then go back and make assessments about how to improve the Transition Assistance Program.

Mr. *Levin.* Thank you, Under Secretary.

With that, I would now like to recognize Ranking Member Bilirakis for 5 minutes.

Mr. *Bilirakis.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman, I appreciate it very much. Good questions, by the way.

Ms. Devlin, last year we saw how the Voc Rehab Program and the implementation of its new case management study did not have the proper oversight in its execution, and saw with the implementation of the Forever GI Bill that additional oversight was clearly needed.

Regarding the Department's position on the fourth administration bill, can you please go into greater detail about how added oversight over these important economic programs is unnecessary?

Ms. *Devlin.* Thank you for the question, I am happy to address it. Up until recently, up until our restructuring, we did have additional oversight over those programs with the Deputy Under Secretary for Economic Opportunity. What we did in fact was eliminate those layers of bureaucracy.

And somebody mentioned having a seat at the table. Whereas in the past we might have had two Deputy Under Secretaries with a seat at the table for their respective programs, every program executive director, including the Acting Executive Director for Education Service, the Director for Voc Rehab, the Director for a loan guaranty, these programs that we are talking about, they have a seat at the table with the Under Secretary, with myself as the principal Deputy Under Secretary.

When Dr. Lawrence and I entered into these roles that we have now in May, one of the first priorities we knew we had to face was the issues with Colmery. We immediately began

weekly meetings on Colmery Act implementation, which is why we were able to detect the issues and concerns when we did, and elevate those concerns to the Secretary, so that the Secretary could take action, which he did.

The other issue we knew was important is we watched the hearing with the then Executive Director of Voc Rehab and understood the issues with the case management system and the staffing issues in VETERANS AFFAIRS&E, and we came to realize that the VBA had never acted on the legislation from 2016 to increase the hiring of Voc Rehab counselors to get to a 1-to-125 ratio. That was immediate action taken on the part of our leadership and that was immediate action taken because all those executive directors had a seat at the table.

The other thing I just would like to point out is that the inter-connectivity between all of the VBA programs, it is like vital organs that are connected, and when you go to separate them you can't see it as just taking a basket of benefits and distributing it now across two baskets; they are interconnected. When we talk about survivor issues, there are parts of the disability compensation system and parts of the education system that have to interplay.

The chain of command in a regional office is one chain of command under one director. These division-level managers work together to resolve issues together, they have synergies among each other, that would be taken apart with the separation of the programs.

And the last point I will make is that the 1-year implementation is too tight. Creating this--taking this action will create a huge distraction away from implementation of things like Colmery Act and other transformations that we have underway in VETERANS AFFAIRS&E, and other programs in the economic opportunity suite.

Mr. *Bilirakis.* Okay. Is there anybody on the panel that has an opposing view that would like to comment on Ms. Devlin's remarks?

Ms. *Burgess.* Mr. Ranking Member, I would say that the American public believes that the core function of Congress' oversight and, from that perspective, is there ever too much of its core function that it can do.

Thank you.

Mr. *Bilirakis.* Okay. All right, why don't I go ahead and ask my--well, we don't have a lot of time. I will get--

is one more question--

Mr. *Levin.* Yes.

Mr. *Bilirakis.* Okay, I appreciate it. Mr. Kamin and Mr. Murray, please share with us why it is important that we improve a servicemember's transition from active duty to civilian life, and how the draft TAP bill proposes key changes that will positively impact overall outcomes for individuals separating from the military?

Again, just basically following up on the chairman's questions. These are really important bills today that we are hearing about. Go ahead.

Mr. *Kamin.* Thank you, sir. And we agree that this is an important issue in terms of how we can update and elevate TAP, and I would say two things on this.

Number one, we have talked a little bit about community providers being important and we could look at this as on-time versus in-time delivery, where we recognize that when people are approaching their EDS date from active duty oftentimes the last thing on your mind is tweaking your resume or learning these soft skills. It is just not where most people's heads are at and I can say that having

transitioned twice from active duty.

And, as Ms. Burgess pointed out, that doesn't mean that down the road you do realize, shoot, I wish I had paid attention more. And by putting this information into the fingertips of veterans, we see that as critical.

And, secondly, as our survey pointed out, there is a problem where there are no community providers that are represented on TAP and this takes active steps to re-engage communities, because we know that civic association engagement through peer-to-peer mentorship is a critical part and it is one that is lacking right now.

Mr. *Bilirakis.* Thank you.

Mr. Murray, briefly, can you comment, please?

Mr. *Murray.* Absolutely. I think providing grants to organizations that provide the connections and the services for transition is important. Also, connecting the servicemembers with the community of where they are looking to move to. Not everybody moves off of Camp Pendleton and moves to San Diego, they might move back to the middle of the country or the East Coast. So having the knowledge of what is actually in that community before you get there is very

important; it is preventative, it is not something that we are looking to clean up the mess afterwards.

Mr. *Bilirakis.* Thank you very much, very helpful.

I yield back, Mr. Chair.

Mr. *Levin.* Thank you, Mr. Ranking Member.

I would now like to recognize Miss Rice for 5 minutes.

Miss *Rice.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Burgess, can you expound on--so I think one of the biggest issues is how we help members transition from active duty back to civilian life, and I know that there are a lot of high-tech companies that are actually working with the VA to--actually, you know, different branches of government to reach out to people who are going to be separating with 6 months and actually employing them and training them for the like 5 million jobs that are unfilled in that high-tech industry, and it really works well. I mean, there literally is not one second from the time that they separate from active duty to the time that they are employed in the private sector, literally, not a second.

So can you--I mean, they know how to do it, but they are not doing it enough. I guess it is not their fault, but tell

us how we can do it better. I mean, it just seems to be one of those problems that should be--we should be able to address.

Ms. *Burgess.* Thank you for your question.

So, in transition, what happens is not only is there the employment aspect of it, but there is also the psychological aspects of it and the narrative aspects of it, and it is the narrative that can also be the actual--the point of difficulty, because the employers often don't understand what it means to have been in the military and what it means to be a veteran. And so they are coming at it also needing basically a narrative in which to interact with the veteran, and if that narrative is predominantly that veterans are broken and that they need a suite of programs to help them to succeed no matter what, they are already viewing veterans as a deficit that they have to invest in towards a negative way.

So if the entire narrative overall is that veterans are actually successful and that they actually succeed very well in relation to their civilian peers, then the employers and the entire suite of the community is already on a positive note about veterans. And I think that is one of the most

important levels of success.

Miss *Rice.* Well, yeah, but the reality is that a lot of them are dealing with issues that they need to deal with-- I mean, that need to be addressed.

Ms. *Burgess.* So one of the most important things that they need is a sense of identity and it is the identity that helps them to work through these particular issues. I would never say that the increase in mental health programs has been negative. This is an important step forward for Congress and the American people to see and to recognize these, but this is recognizing the veteran as an entire human being and a whole-health model. And it is those three elements, education, employment, and a sense of identity in the community that really bring that forward.

Thank you.

Miss *Rice.* I totally agree with. I totally agree with you, I am just writing down some notes. Okay, thank you so much.

Mr. Kamin, so one of the bills that passed in the last Congress that I proposed was called the BRAVE Act and I understand that you have some opposition to that, and you

laid that out very clearly in your written testimony. I just want to make it clear that it was not the intent of the legislation to disadvantage small businesses, but rather to incentivize businesses both large and small to focus on and improve their veteran hiring and retention practice; not just hiring for the sake of getting business, but actually retaining veterans as employees as well.

So do you have any--I would love your input as to how we can in any way modify the legislation to meet that specific intent, but also address your specific concerns.

Mr. *Kamin.* Thank you, ma'am, and I appreciate your concerns. And I do believe we should qualify our position on that, because it is more that we want to study the issue. We take small business very seriously and the concern is, for instance, if I start a small business and I don't have--it is a family business and I have family members who are involved and I am not employing any veterans, will this legislation in some way affect the benefits that I receive.

So that is the only concern and it is something we are happy to work with your office to kind of dive into details to alleviate some of those concerns. So that is the only

issue we have.

Miss *Rice.* Wonderful. Thank you very much and I will follow up with you on that.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. *Levin.* Thank you.

I would now like to recognize Mr. Bergman for 5 minutes.

Mr. *Bergman.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And, you know, as one of the few members who is on both Veterans Affairs' and Armed Services, you know, as we look at the service, if you will, for a young boy or girl when they consider joining the military to their active duty and reserve time, and then their transition to the Veterans Administration system, and many, many, many, many decades later when we are dealing with them and serving them as they close out to their next transition, it is extremely important that we consider all of those strings and all those threads that attach.

Ms. Devlin, is the VA including the individual Ready Reserve in any of the pilot programs? Those, you know, men and women who have served their initial obligation in their 8-year contract, but yet they have transitioned from active duty. They still have a responsibility because of their

contract to be in the individual Ready Reserve, although now they are back in the education world, the business world, the whatever. Anything, any pilot programs reaching out through the services or the Reserve components to make sure that that group understands what transition--you know, what version of TAP might be available to them while they are in there?

Ms. *Devlin.* That is a great question, thank you.

One of the things that we did in April of last year was we revamped the Transition Assistance Program for active duty and in doing so we also considered the different needs of the Reservists and also National Guard.

So one of the things that we learned from that population is that their benefits are different in the sense of their entitlement can be different based on whether they were called up, whether they were not called up. So we do have a different platform that enables them to understand their benefits and their unique entitlements.

We also participate in many of the field-based activities for outreach such as Yellow Ribbon Program activities to try to reach individuals that may not have been a part of the TAP program and may not be aware of their

benefits.

Mr. *Bergman.* In your estimate, if you took 100 percent of the people eligible for TAP, what percentage of them have that--if you will, that 2 or 4 or 6 years of service and then have transitioned, as opposed to those walking out the door with 20-plus years and a retirement pension that is in their pocket at that time?

Ms. *Devlin.* So, I don't have that data at my fingertips, and I can take it for the record, but I can tell you that the military services have been really great about offering different classrooms for individuals who are leaving the military and more of a senior leadership status versus their junior enlisted individuals, because their lifestyles circumstances are typically different. So, they have been very good about that.

And I know Department of Defense isn't here to speak on their own behalf, but we have a very close working relationship with DoD and the military services and Department of Labor and we work on these issues together.

Mr. *Bergman.* Okay. Ms. Burgess, you made a comment that you mentioned about soft-communication skills, did I get

that right? Would you explain that, please.

Ms. *Burgess.* Yes. So, there is the hard skills of just the technical aspect of a particular employment and the soft skills, which are mainly communication skills--how do you interact with your fellow employees, your employer, how do you understand the workplace, those types of aspects.

Mr. *Bergman.* So, do you see a difference between, let's say you had two brothers or two sisters that were twins--one went into the military and one didn't--do you see a difference in their soft communication skills that one might have versus the other one?

Ms. *Burgess.* The veterans, themselves, say that they do, because of the structures and hierarchy of military life and then the various different structures and stresses of being in a civilian employment where you can be more of an advocate for yourself sometimes in relation with your employer or your boss, say.

Mr. *Bergman.* Okay. And I know we are going to have a second round. What I am going to do right now, rather than get into an involved question, I am just going to yield back and then we will go to the second round.

Mr. *Levin.* Thank you. With that, Ms. Luria is now recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. *Luria.* Well, thank you.

And thank you all for being here today. I wanted to follow up on both, the chairman and the ranking member's question, again, about the VET OPP Act.

And for Ms. Devlin, just going back to some of the comments that you made in your opening statement. So, I can fully understand the VA's position, I wanted to get more in-depth details from you. You said that while the VA appreciates the committee's focus on improving services resources offered by these programs, we do not support this bill. And, furthermore, you say that you have accomplished organizational restructuring that fundamentally changes the way the VA operates.

And one of my biggest concerns is that we change things and we change them too rapidly to allow them to go into effect and then evaluate them. So, can you talk about some of those changes and how you think they affect these specific range of things that fall economic opportunity and then what the metrics will be by which you could measure them so we

could have a better opinion if those changes may actually already be effective and this may be redundant.

Ms. *Devlin.* Absolutely. I am happy to address that. One of the things that we realized in looking at the organizational structure, first of all, was that every executive director for each of these business lines did not have a seat at the table. There was a filter between them and the under secretary, and myself, as the principal deputy under secretary.

So, one of the things we did was make sure they all had an equal voice--that is done. The other piece that we realized is that our very important Transition Assistance Program, which, by the way, is a passion of mine, I would like to see that we make improvements before my son transitions out of the Marine Corps in a few years.

One of the things we realized is that there was a lack of transparency. So, if you looked at our budget up until the 2020 budget, we did not have a chapter in the budget specifically speaking to transition or the Transition Assistance Program; in fact, the information around how much we were spending on that program was buried inside the

Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program chapter, because it didn't have its own chapter.

We not only created an operational office to lead that program so that it had direct oversight over one executive director who was responsible for that mission; whereas in the past, the executive director responsible for TAP was always responsible for other programs, as well. And so, it is operational, but it is also in the budget. So, now we have very much more transparency so that as we talk about programming funds, it will be clear where those funds are going.

The other piece that we elevated is the Chapter 36, career and educational counseling program. Over the course of many years, there is a direct appropriation for contracting out those services and it has been very underutilized. So we are focusing efforts on actually talking to transitioning servicemembers and veterans to identify what it is that they think they would like out of that program and how could we better tailor it to their needs and also market it better to them so that they understand they can take advantage of it.

We also lead by example. Speaking to the issues of soft skills and also employers hiring veterans, I am a rehabilitation counselor by training, so my job, when I first joined VA, was to help veterans with service-connected disabilities get to an employment goal. So, I understand that very, very well.

We did update our website, by the way, about a year and a half ago. So, we do have information on there. But in terms of employers, we lead by example. We have a program called WARTAC and what we do is we go to military installations across the country and we recruit servicemembers before they transition to become veteran service representatives and work in our disability compensation system, working the veterans' claims. So, we lead by example in terms of making sure that we provide employment opportunities to these veterans, as well.

Ms. *Luria.* Okay. Another thing that is cited in the discussion of this particular topic is that the TAP program requires an overlap with the Department of Labor, because the Department of Labor actually has a lead. Three days of the program are administered by the Department of Labor. And

what I have the impression that this seeks to do is improve that relationship between the VA and the Department of Labor to make that more smooth.

Do you feel like you currently have a good working relationship with the Department of Labor to deliver this content and are they willing to make adjustments, as both sides determine that there is new things that need to be included in the curriculum?

Ms. *Devlin.* We have an excellent relationship with our Department of Labor partners at this time, yes, and we talk frequently. In fact, we have a regularly recurring meeting at various levels in the VA between various levels of Department of Labor, including the interagency structure that is formal, but also, we have informal conversations. We pick up the phone and call each other and discuss ideas. So, we definitely have a good collaboration.

Ms. *Luria.* And, lastly, you mentioned a survey that you are doing at certain, post-separation, for veterans to collect data. And do you feel that that will give you a continuous feedback loop on how the process is working?

Ms. *Devlin.* Absolutely. We do. We are very excited

to get the survey started. We just got approval from OMB last week, so we are now in the process of getting ready to start fielding the survey.

Ms. *Luria.* Thank you. I yield back my time.

Mr. *Levin.* Thank you. Mr. Barr is now recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. *Barr.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thanks for holding this hearing, and thank you to our witnesses.

And as we think about veterans' benefits and think about, especially the jurisdiction of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, I think of the statistic that we are confronted with in Congress that there are more job openings in America today than there are unemployed Americans. And I love what you said, Ms. Burgess, about veterans being assets. They most certainly are.

And in my experience in meeting veterans in the Sixth Congressional District, especially those who have recently separated from their active duty, these are the best and brightest our country has to offer. They most certainly are assets because they exhibit qualities of teamwork. They exhibit qualities of leadership, of a service to a cause

greater than, themselves. These are exactly the qualities that employers are desperate for right now in this country. So, it is very, very important that we get this right and we continue to offer our veterans with greater opportunities to meet that need in the labor market.

I did want to ask Ms. Devlin a question about the STEM scholarships issue. The draft legislation that we shared with you, we appreciate your feedback in improving or making some suggestions on how we can improve the legislation. My district does boast a number of colleges and universities that offer STEM degrees, as well as a large veteran population. So, I look forward to introducing an updated version of this draft legislation with Chairman Levin in the coming days.

Ms. Devlin, in your testimony, you listed a number of provisions in the draft legislation that may expand the Rogers STEM Scholarship beyond its original intent and so, possibly, that draft was an overcorrection to fix the too-narrow credit hour requirement currently in law.

Would the VA support a narrowly tailored fix to the Rogers Scholarship that only removes the hard-to-obtain 128-

credit-hour requirement and, instead, replace it with the much more common, 120-semester-credit-hour requirement?

Ms. *Devlin.* We would definitely support an amendment that wouldn't be quite as restrictive or as open as it changed. I think the 120 hours, we would want to go back and do some research on that to see if that is the right cutoff, but we would definitely want to work with you on that.

We also would want to take a look at the two-year funding and ensure that the funding is awarded by school year and not by fiscal year, because that is how the programs operate at colleges and universities.

Mr. *Barr.* Okay. Well, thanks for your perspective on that. I mean, if we made those corrections, have you considered an estimate of how many more veterans and STEM programs would be able to take advantage of the scholarship?

Ms. *Devlin.* We think it will open it up much, much more. We haven't had any start because it effectively goes into place in August, but it is definitely very, very restricted with 128 hours. We are not sure if veterans will be able to participate with that restriction in place.

Mr. *Barr.* Well, as I was alluding to before, there is

a lot of demand for skilled workers, and especially in the STEM areas, where we see a deficiency in the labor market.

Ms. Haycock, Mr. Murray, and Mr. Kamin, a goal of the subcommittee is to produce legislation that sets up our servicemembers for success in their transition to civilian life. The Post-9/11 G.I. Bill is critical in allowing our veterans to get the education they have earned.

In your work with veterans, what programs or fields of study are you seeing veterans trend toward using their Post-9/11 G.I. Bill?

Mr. *Murray.* So, sir, there was a very informative study done by our friends at Student Veterans of America called the "Invest Study" that showed that the majority were seeking business degrees, the second was STEM. So, what we are seeing is veterans are transitioning or servicemembers are transitioning out and they are not using their skills in the military; they are looking to do something entirely different.

The military, by and large, does not teach business; it teaches much different skills. So, getting out and doing something wholly different is something we really support.

Mr. *Kamin.* Yes, and I would echo Pat's mention of our friends at Student Veterans of America and their study invest, which also showed that veterans are graduating at a higher rate than their cohorts and cohort, non-traditional students. So, we are seeing them carry this legacy of success from the World War II generation onward that we are proving and really fundamentally changing the idea of a benefit to match what we have always pathologized as investment. That is genuinely the case here, where we are seeing the taxpayer money is being paid back by what they are giving to the country.

Ms. *Haycock.* And I would like to also add that in survivor space, we are seeing a huge uptake in survivors pursuing degrees in the mental health space. The number one population for or number two population for loss we have seen this year is actually suicides. So, seeing the large numbers there, so many of the families who lost a loved one to suicide, then want to go in and work in suicide prevention and mental health and counseling; the things that they felt like their loved ones would have benefited from.

Mr. *Barr.* Thanks for your great work with TAPS.

Thanks. I yield back.

Mr. *Levin.* Thank you, Mr. Barr.

Now, I would like to recognize Mr. Pappas for 5 minutes.

Mr. *Pappas.* Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And thank you to the members of the panel here today. I think we are all interested in the range of bills that are before us and the opportunity to allow every veteran to reach his or her full potential. So, I thank you for sharing your thoughts.

I want to start with Ms. Devlin. I thank you for being here and for the VA's work in partnering with HUD on the HUD VASH program to combat veterans homelessness. I understand that the VA is still preparing a formal response on Representative Peters' bill to expand eligibility for the HUD VASH program to veterans who receive other-than-honorable discharges.

It is an issue of interest to me, I think, as we look at the President's misguided transgender service ban, as we look at the legacy of the "don't ask don't tell" era, where thousands of veterans received other-than-honorable discharges just for being who they are. I think there is a

real issue here.

So, I am wondering, given that, if you can speak on your own impressions of this bill and if there is anything with the proposed legislation that might be an issue for the VA.

Ms. *Devlin.* Unfortunately, I can't speak to that bill. That falls under the Veterans Health Administration and as you indicated, we haven't finalized our official views on that, so I can't speak on my personal behalf on that.

I will tell you, though, homelessness is important to us and VBA, as well, and I can speak to what we do in terms of having veterans--we have coordinators in regional offices whose goal is to conduct outreach for homeless veterans and to ensure that if a veteran is homeless, that they get priority treatment, with respect to getting any of their benefits awarded.

Mr. *Pappas.* Well, thanks for the response. You know, Mr. Murray indicated before that veterans with other-than-honorable discharges are more likely to experience homelessness, to be a suicide statistic. I am wondering if you agree with those status, as well?

Ms. *Devlin.* It is clearly a disadvantage for a

veteran leaving with an other-than-honorable. In some cases, they have expedited exits as well and don't get the benefits of TAPS. So, we do recognize that this is a population that can sometimes be at risk and that is why we have made some changes that we have made in recent history, to enable them to have access to certain care benefits.

Mr. *Pappas.* Okay. Well, I hope you take a look at the legislation.

Also some discussion about the Justice for Servicemembers Act, and Mr. Kamin weighed in on that one. I appreciate your comments. I don't know if the VFW has any position on this, in terms of banning forced arbitration?

Mr. *Murray.* We support that provision and we are interested in keeping the discussion going about adding SCRA protections, as well. We think the law was meant there to protect our servicemembers and we should be stopping every opportunity to circumvent that.

Mr. *Pappas.* Yeah, I mean, I have seen this in my own district. Heard about this quite a bit, specifically from the National Guard and Reserve. We have folks who are returning from mobilization to happy New Hampshire and are

facing down this challenge, and so I hope everyone agrees that we need to ensure that servicemembers aren't disadvantaged for wearing the uniform and for serving their country, especially when they are coming back from a deployment.

I am wondering, Mr. Kamin, if you could address the issue that Mr. Murray just raised about the Servicemember Civil Relief Act and if you support including those disputes in prohibitions on forced arbitration, as well.

Mr. *Kamin.* Yeah, absolutely. And it is worth noting, as we examine a lot of these protection members across government that SCRA and USERRA, that came from DoD saying, Enough is enough. This is affecting our readiness. This is affecting our posture when servicemembers are being taken advantage of and exploited by certain payday lenders and et cetera.

SCRA is an interesting one in terms of how we can strength it. A landmark case that happened around 2010 was with JPMorgan and they went into litigation with--over a SCRA violation and ultimately that case was settled and JPMorgan actually, I think, grew from that significantly where now

they are a tremendous supporter of military veterans. But because that went into--because that got settled the question of whether punitive damages are a part of SCRA was never answered.

And so, there is a risk that if another lawsuit happens and it goes up the circuit and they determine that the congressional intent does not include punitive damages, that means that the best a veteran or a servicemember can get is their money back, not their time, not their energy, not the devastation that was inflicted upon them by, you know, asset forfeitures, et cetera. So, we want to get ahead of the power curve on here when it comes to SCRA and make sure that gets taken care of and we can clarify congressional intent.

Mr. *Pappas.* Thanks for making that point. I hope we can straighten this out. I appreciate your support for that legislation.

And I yield back, Mr. Chair.

Mr. *Levin.* Thank you, Mr. Pappas.

We do have some time for some additional questions, and I will start by recognizing myself for 5 minutes. I wanted to ask broadly of the group about HUD VASH, following up on

some of the prior questions. There are a number of veteran homelessness programs that do allow OTH discharges to participate in those programs.

Do your organizations recommend that we bring eligibility for HUD VASH in line with other veteran homelessness programs, with regard to OTH discharges?

Mr. *Murray.* Yes, sir. Just to make sure that we are taking care of everyone we can, we think that the HUD VASH program is a very valuable tool for our veterans facing homelessness. Veterans with other-than-honorable discharges should be made eligible for those just to keep them from some of these negative outcomes that we see.

Mr. *Levin.* Anybody else care to comment? All quiet, okay.

Could--for VFW, could you walk us through the connection that you see between the lack of HUD VASH vouchers for other-than-honorable discharges and reducing veteran suicide.

Mr. *Murray.* Unfortunately, there are a lot of contributing factors with veteran suicide--financial instability, homelessness, not having the resources to be able to cope with mental health issues. And we feel that,

you know, putting a roof over their head, getting them in a safe and secure area, that is why we think adding additional funds for the HUD VASH vouchers so they don't have to be in low-income, possibly high-crime areas, that they feel safe and secure. That is just a step that we can help to mitigate the problem of suicide.

Mr. *Levin.* And lastly for the group as a whole, are there any other reporting requirements that you think we should be focused on or refine or include in relation to the HUD VASH program that could help guide our oversight of the program in the future?

Go right ahead. Not all at once.

Mr. *Murray.* So, one of the things that we think, you know, to expand the program for oversight and expansion is things like permanent funding. Helping this subcommittee-- helping to redefine homelessness so that--and help de-stigmatize it--so that the idea of couch-surfing is something that we hear a lot of, that those folks are eligible for it. They are truly homeless. To be preventive.

In terms of reporting, you know, finding out those folks who might have been homeless and not known it, like I said,

the couch-surfing thing, sleeping on your friend's, you know, basement, that is actually homeless. So, getting that kind of reporting, how much veterans are affected by things like that.

Mr. *Kamin.* Yeah, I would also just add that there is a coding term, garbage in, garbage out, where if you are not measuring the best--I mean, the most accurate numbers or the actual data, then we are getting a false positive. And we don't want to be in a case where we are allotting homelessness being gotten rid of because we are not taking into account, like Mr. Murray said, people who are on their couch or people who don't meet a certain criteria or OTHs or anything else.

So, in terms of reporting, being able to fine-tune and stay ahead of the curve and getting real-time information on this is definitely something that we look forward to working with your office on.

Ms. *Devlin.* I would just add from the VA's standpoint, we actually ask veterans on our certain applications for benefits if they are homeless or about to be homeless so we can avert a crisis-potentially situation for

them by helping them with their benefits, and we treat them both the same, in terms of expediting their services.

Mr. *Levin.* Thank you, Under Secretary. I appreciate that. It is obviously a big concern in our entire country, but particularly in Southern California and my district, Greater San Diego, we have about 1,300 homeless veterans and you hear a lot about the need for more VASH vouchers, the need for more caseworkers. So, I really do hope that we are able to work on a bipartisan basis to pass these two bills, and I really appreciate your comments.

I would like to now recognize Mr. Bergman again for 5 minutes.

Mr. *Bergman.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And Ms. Devlin, kind of a follow on what I asked last time if you would please take for the record, my request for a breakdown of the percentage--not necessarily total numbers--but a percentage of TAP efforts, with regard to breaking it down to first- and second-term enlistments, so those who have, you know, served maybe 4 to 8 years and then transitioned out, and the numbers who are 20-plus years, who are technically retirees, at that point.

Because as we allocate our limited resources in focusing on the different groups who, you know, have different needs, I would really like to know what the VA sees, as far as that, okay?

Ms. Burgess, in your written testimony, you discuss how legislation that emphasizes post-service growth through a focus on education and economic opportunity programs has the power to shift the veteran's narrative towards a positive veteran's image or veteran image. Can you discuss how we can do this and why the reorganization at the department--the VA, that Department would accomplish this.

Ms. *Burgess.* Absolutely. Thank you so much for the question. So, the point is that all of the legislation--I did a long history of the legislation around veterans' services and benefits since the very beginning, even colonial times--and what we see is that veterans' legislation has always had a little bit of a negative aspect of fixing something--best intentions--but what that has created over time is this idea that veterans are a population uniquely in need of services and uniquely not able to give back.

And so, if that is what legislation in and of itself can

do, then legislation can also be used positively, I believe. Through the VET OPP Act, say, is one, obviously, piece of legislation that I see right now that could completely shift this, bringing it into a 21st Century narrative and model that shows that veterans are assets and that we need to uplift them and that we need to invest in them because we have already invested in them and we need to make good on that investment. And to also relate to veterans, themselves, that the American people and Congress believe that they are assets.

Mr. *Bergman.* Okay. In fact, just hearing you talk reminded me of a time back in the early '90s when then a commandant in the Marine Corps, General Krulak, said what the Marine Corps did is we make Marines and we win battles. And his successor, General Jones, said we make Marines, win battles, and return good citizens to our society. And I think that is what we are talking about here; returning good citizens to be productive members of society.

Again, Ms. Burgess and Mr. Murray, in VA's written testimony on H.R. 2045, the VET OPP Act, they oppose the creation of a fourth administration and express concern that

this would "increase oversight for programs" and would be "contrary to the moderation efforts that took place."

Can each of you please respond to that concern and why, instead, the creation of a fourth administration is positive, according to your organizations. Mr. Murray, first.

Mr. *Murray.* Yes, sir. Thank you, General.

We welcome more oversight. We feel this is a great way to help streamline and, you know, use these programs and benefits more efficiently. As Ms. Burgess said, you know, a lot of times we are thinking about fixing things. The areas under fourth admin that we want to see are the forward-looking benefits, the ones that can be progressive, can be transformative. They are not fixing things; they are making things better for the future.

That is why we want to see more oversight so these programs are properly implemented so that the good citizens coming back can continue to be productive members of society.

Ms. *Burgess.* Can I just say hear, hear, yes. I would say, also, as I said before, that separating out the management of the programs honors the difference between them and the compensation programs and creates accountability,

attention, and leadership over what could be the nation's most important instrument in partnering with veterans in their civilian success.

Mr. *Bergman.* And I see that I have got about 30 seconds left. Thanks to all of you, because I know you are all--we are all trying to do the right thing here, because as we think about those young men and women who choose to serve in the United States military and the most--the highest percentage of those only serve one term. I mean, that is a reality. We are not talking everybody going in and staying for 20 years.

And as we continue to populate our uniform forces, whether it be active, guard, or reserve, we need to be able to focus on those programs that allow men and women who transition and then stay involved so when we need them and our country needs them to deploy, whether it be individually or as part of a unit, they are ready and they have felt that their service has always been valued from beginning to end.

So, thank you all, and I yield back.

Mr. *Levin.* Thank you, Mr. Bergman.

Now, I would like to recognize Ms. Luria, again, for 5

minutes.

Ms. *Luria.* Well, thank you. And, again, thank you for participating in the hearing.

And I see these hearings having two roles: one is to make sure that we are giving you the tools, as the VA, that you need in order to do your job, as well as the oversight that we have discussed. So, I wanted to ask an additional question. Are there any barriers in the current legislation, as it stands within your current organization, that prevent you from providing the services that you need to provide to veterans in those areas that are in the purview of this committee?

Ms. *Devlin.* No, ma'am, there are no barriers. If I might, I just want to point out that it sounds like we are trying to create two classes of veterans here; the veterans who have economic opportunity and the veterans who have disabilities. And I would make the case--again, I come from a framework of a rehabilitation counselor--disabilities don't define a person.

And what we have done by having all of these benefits together is allow a veteran to not define him or herself by

their disability, but to combine any benefits they do get because of their disabilities with the benefits to enable them to overcome those disabilities through the robust education benefits that we have, through the Vocational Rehabilitation Employment Program, through the ability to buy a home. All of those benefits being bundled together, to me, is a natural fit versus trying to create two classes of veterans; one that goes to the door of the disability benefits arena, which is what we would, in fact, be creating, and one that goes to the door of the economic opportunity suite of benefits. It just doesn't seem to make sense to me.

Ms. *Luria.* I appreciate that analogy, as well, because I think they feed on each other. The educational benefits are then a tool for people to move beyond something that may be a service-related disability, especially with rehabilitation-type programs. So, thank you for sharing that.

I yield back my time.

Mr. *Levin.* Thank you. I would like to now recognize our distinguished ranking member, Mr. Bilirakis for 5 minutes.

Mr. *Bilirakis.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate it. I think you have done a great job with this committee so far in our first hearing. Well, it is true, and I mean, it is your first time chairing a committee, correct, in Congress?

Mr. *Levin.* Yes, sir.

Mr. *Bilirakis.* Yeah, so, we have got a lot of work to do and I look forward to working with you and getting it done.

So, the first question is for Ms. Haycock. And it says, Can you please go into detail about how the Fry Scholarship change will help ensure degree completion for these students. So, we are talking about the students or possibly their parents are active-duty or reserve and the parent had a disability and passed away, while not being on active-duty.

So, what difference will this make, this particular bill that I am sponsoring with the chairman, with regard to those students? Will it help them complete their degrees? And if you want to give us an example--I know of a few--so that people can understand how important this bill is. Thank you.

Ms. *Haycock.* Sure. So, currently these families do

fall under the Chapter 35 program, which is just a stipend of about \$1,2000.

The Fry Scholarship is a much more exhaustive benefit with the full in-state constitution, the BAH, the book stipend.

Currently, a lot of these children are not necessarily attending the schools of their choice just because, financially, they cannot afford to do so. Even though they are eligible for so many of the other same programs, the family gets the same DIC, the same life insurance policy, things like that. This piece is different.

And so, for these families, it is not even so much about the degree completion; though, if they can't afford to go to a school, in general, then they are not going to be able to complete a degree, but also giving them the ability to be able to go to the school they want.

So, some of the kids we have seen choose to go to a local community college just because they cannot afford to go to their local four-year school or the degree program of their choice. So, this will help get them into those schools, financially, as well as allow them to complete the

process.

The BAH portion allows students to not necessarily work full time while in school, so that they have more financial freedom to focus on their studies and graduate at a higher rate.

Mr. *Bilirakis.* Okay. Thank you very much.

The next question is for Mr. Murray and Mr. Kamin, the VFW and The American Legion. Are you concerned that eliminating the ability for employers to use arbitration agreements that are in place, all other employees could incentivize employers to not hiring servicemembers in the first place, so--and we are concerned about our servicemembers being hired and getting good jobs. Are you concerned about this particular issue, with regard to arbitration?

Mr. *Murray.* We are concerned about, essentially, losing your rights and being forced into these things in order--as a condition of employment. We would, obviously, discourage employees from not wanting to hire a veteran with the thought that they might deploy in the future or something like that. That is--you know, that runs into discrimination

issues, things like that.

We want to encourage them that these veterans are assets and if they do deploy and have to step away, you should not force them into an arbitration as part of the condition of employment. We would hope that employers don't, you know, follow that type of practice.

Mr. *Bilirakis.* Yes, sir?

Mr. *Kamin.* And as a reservist right now, I am very sensitive to that issue and I would be lying if I didn't tell you that I know people in my unit who exclude their reserve service on their resumes, because they believe that companies will be less inclined to hire them if they know that they have these duties.

That being said, we believe that the intent of USERRA is clear in this regard and that if all a company should do is compel a forced arbitration, then why did we begin this process in the first place? We know the obligation that our country--that these veterans give to their country and we need to honor that and we still believe that USERRA is the best way to do that and arbitration shouldn't be a part of it.

Mr. *Bilirakis.* Okay. Thank you. I appreciate it.

And I yield back, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate it.

Mr. *Levin.* Thank you, Mr. Ranking Member.

Mr. Barr is now recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. *Barr.* Thanks once again, Mr. Chairman. And I concur with the ranking member, great job on your maiden voyage as chairman of this subcommittee, and I am honored to serve with you on this subcommittee.

I want to talk a little bit about a bipartisan bill that I am proud to co-sponsor with Representative Scott Levin and Zeldin, H.R. 1988. This is the Protect Affordable Mortgages for Veterans Act of 2019.

And, obviously, as veterans are transitioning, our servicemembers transitioning into civilian life, the goal of home ownership is one of the ways that we can get those veterans in a good financial position to have a very successful future. This legislation would provide a technical correction for about 2,500 VA-guaranteed home loans that are currently ineligible for Ginnie Mae pooling, due to a seasoning requirement issue that I think you are aware of.

I think that we can all agree that there is a problem

that Congress created, and I was part of the authoring the legislation, S.2155 and some of the provisions in that from the last Congress, but when we create a problem, inadvertently, we obviously need to fix it, and H.R. 1988 will do that. I was encouraged to see that all of you all who mentioned H.R. 1988 in your testimony, supported it.

This is open to any of you all. Can you speak to the benefit of VA-backed home loans and the liquidity that is provided by Ginnie Mae with these VA-backed home loans and what that means for our veteran families.

Mr. *Murray.* Sir, we feel that the VA Home Loan Program is one of the best benefits out there. It is hands-down, much better than, you know, civilian counterparts. It is something that we always want to see improved, protected.

With the seasoning requirement, we understand that there were some unintended consequences and, you know, it was--the intent was to try to protect and help veterans using that program, not inadvertently hurt them. So, you know, we are onboard with cleaning that up to make sure that those up to 2,500 veterans are taken care of the right way.

Mr. *Kamin.* Yes, and I would concur. And we are

actually approaching the 75th anniversary of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944. The first home loan was actually bought in a suburb in I think Northwest DC and I believe the VBA is actually looking at putting a plaque there to commemorate it. So, there is storied history of success. This is the--it is the VA homeowners that really created the middle class; more so, perhaps, even arguably, than the education component, because we saw these vast suburban tracks develop. And while the fixes are necessary, we have been very encouraged and that is a fast--program and it is great to see that you are focused on it.

Ms. *Devlin.* So, I have to say I concur with all that they have said. We agree that the technical fix will create--it will fix it so that it is better for veterans, better for Ginnie Mae, better for lenders, so that there is no concerns about VA-backed loans. It is a great opportunity for veterans to buy home loans, in many cases, without a--with a zero down payment and it is a really great way for them to make an investment in their future.

Mr. *Barr.* And, Ms. Devlin, I also appreciate the fact that you recognize that there is a valued purpose for the

seasoning requirement and you spelled out those arguments very well, I think, in your testimony. But, obviously, there is an unintended consequence to the legislation in the last Congress, and we don't want these 2,500 orphan loans to be kind of a victim of that unintended consequence.

What would happen, Ms. Devlin, to these particular veterans if those 2,500 orphan loans were not fixed by this technical correction?

Ms. *Devlin.* Well, I think the potential, right, exists that any of these lenders could suffer consequences which could then affect the veterans. I don't believe that the veterans, in particular, are in any danger, absent the lenders having any issues.

But I think the technical fix is important because it doesn't create the potential for future lending opportunities to be--the door to be closed on veterans because of the potential risk.

And the loan seasoning is an important protection, too, because we don't want veterans to just be, I will say targeted for immediate and quick refinancing when that may not be in their best interests.

Mr. *Barr.* In my remaining time, I am just going to quickly comment to Ms. Haycock regarding the legislation that would extend benefits to the Guard and Reserve components. I would appreciate your support of that.

I represent the Kentucky Army and the International Guard and the Boone Center in Frankfort and there is an inequity, as those anecdotes that you shared in your testimony, and so we appreciate your advocacy of that legislation.

I yield back.

Mr. *Levin.* Thank you, Mr. Barr.

Before I make a few closing remarks, any final statement from our distinguished ranking member?

Mr. *Bilirakis.* I am fine. I just wanted to let you know that--well, thank you for the witnesses, for their testimony--very informative. And these are very important bills and I understand that we will mark them up next month when we get back from our Easter recess; is that correct?

Okay. Very good. Thank you. Great job, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate it. I yield back.

Mr. *Levin.* Thank you, Mr. Ranking Member.

I think this hearing has highlighted some important facts and in particular, two things. First, we have a long way to go until we uphold the promise we have made to our veterans. Many remain homeless or are barely making ends meet, despite the great work being done by many of you.

And then many more veterans and their families are unable to access the benefits to which they are entitled. For me, these benefits are not just about economic opportunities; they are critical tools for reintegration and readjustment to civilian life.

Secondly, today's hearing has shown that this committee leaves politics at the door. That is pretty refreshing. I wish we did more of that around here. Democrats and republicans, alike, are committed to improving the lives of American veterans and I like the fact that if you are just listening to today's hearing, rather than watching, you don't know which side the folks speaking are on. I wish that all of our committees were more like that.

This subcommittee is going to continue to work collaboratively, and I am looking forward to working with our distinguished ranking member, Mr. Bilirakis, and all of our

members this Congress.

I would also like to thank our witnesses for bringing their expertise both, in their written testimony and their remarks.

And I would like to thank our staff for preparing, me, exceptionally well today for my first hearing as the subcommittee chair.

With that, I will say that all members will have 5 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks and to include any extraneous material that they didn't have an opportunity to include in the spoken remarks today.

And, lastly, I just want to reiterate what an incredible honor it is to get to chair this subcommittee. It is a responsibility that I take extremely seriously, and I am confident that when we look back at the 116th Congress, the work of this subcommittee will stand out and will be something that we can all be very proud of.

So, with, without objection, this subcommittee stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:40 a.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]