

STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

WITH RESPECT TO

“Pending Legislation”

WASHINGTON, D.C.

April 9, 2019

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

H.R. 95, Homeless Veteran Families Act

Veterans with dependent children face diverse burdens with access to homelessness benefits. The VFW supports this legislation, which would ensure Grant and Per Diem providers are better able to provide much needed housing to homeless veterans with dependent children. The brave men and women who have worn our nation's uniform should never have to worry about whether their children will have a roof over their heads or food on the table. Providing additional per diem for the children of homeless veterans in the Grant and Per Diem Program would expand housing options for veterans and enable the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to reduce the rate of veterans who face homelessness.

H.R. 444, Reduce Unemployment for Veterans of All Ages Act of 2019

The VFW supports this proposal to remove the twelve-year limit on utilizing the Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment (VR&E) program. Arbitrary cut-off dates for VA benefits and programs do not help veterans who need to use these programs later on in life. Just like the lessons learned from the removal of the delimiting date with the Forever GI Bill, doing the same with VR&E removes a potential barrier for veterans to acquire meaningful employment.

Discussion Draft, to amend title 38, United States Code, to make certain improvements to the educational assistance programs of the Department of Veterans Affairs with respect to flight training programs and certain other programs of education, and for other purposes.

The VFW supports this legislation, which would place a cap on the amount of tuition and fees that may be paid under the Post-9/11 GI Bill for programs of education in which a public institution of higher education enters into an agreement with a private entity to provide such education. However, the VFW would like to suggest a recommendation to improve this legislation.

Currently, third party training programs that contract with public schools are able to charge unlimited tuition and fees because the Post-9/11 GI Bill covers the full cost of in-state tuition and fees, regardless of amount, for public non-profit institutions of higher learning. In the past two years, it has come to light that some contracted flight training programs have charged exorbitant fees, which far exceeded the cost of an average in-state education, to profit from exploitation of this loophole. The VFW believes this loophole must be closed by placing a reasonable cap on these flight training programs.

Still, we believe that veterans should have a path to receive the training necessary to enter highly technical, high-demand fields like aviation, which offer good paying jobs to those who are qualified. We also recognize that it may not be realistic for certain flight schools to provide that training under the private school cap per academic year. To mitigate this concern, this legislation would authorize VA to provide accelerated payments of twice the monthly entitlement amount for tuition and fees.

Doing so would enable predatory institutions to continue to gouge VA and force veterans to forego eligibility months simply because the cap for such programs is not sufficient. For this reason, we urge this subcommittee to authorize VA to determine reasonable caps for flight training and similarly contracted training in other high-demand fields, but ensure such programs offer transparency in their fee schedules and cannot simply charge the government an arbitrary rate.

To ensure VA does not set unreasonable caps on contracted programs, the VFW recommends requiring VA to seek congressional approval before proposed caps are implemented. The VFW also continues to support strict enforcement of standing VA policies, which ensures that third-party contractors and their partner schools are charging appropriate fees, while continuing to offer high-quality training to veterans.

H.R. 1718, GI Education Benefits Fairness Act

A discrepancy between VA and the Department of Defense (DOD) definition of children precludes service members from transferring their VA education benefits to their foster or ward children. DOD and VA having separate eligibility requirements for the same benefit is an unfair and confusing practice that must end.

While we support this bill, which would align the definitions of children for the purpose of transferring VA educational benefits, the VFW urges the subcommittee to consider changing VA's overall definition of children to include foster and ward children. Making such a change would be more comprehensive and could impact other beneficiaries who might unintentionally be affected by these differing definitions.

Discussion Draft, Justice for Servicemembers Act

The VFW supports this bill, which would end the practice of making service members waive protections in order to attain employment. The Uniformed Services Employment Rights Act of 1994 was created to protect service members' employment status, and we fully endorse any actions to prevent employers from circumventing those protections.

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.

Veterans with Other Than Honorable (OTH) discharges are at higher risk of dying by suicide and experience higher rates for homelessness than those who receive an honorable discharge. The VFW supports this bill, which would rightfully ensure OTH veterans have access to the HUD-VA Supportive Housing (VASH) program.

Discussion Draft, Homes for Our Heroes Act of 2019

Veterans fortunate enough to obtain HUD-VASH vouchers often face difficulty finding homes in safe neighborhoods. VFW service officers in various cities have reported that homeless veterans sometimes prefer sleeping under a bridge rather than living in the unsafe neighborhoods for which their vouchers are eligible. The VFW supports this bill which would review the HUD-VASH program to ensure vouchers put veterans in safe and secure housing.

Discussion Draft, Veteran Employment and Child Care Access Act

Homeless veterans with dependent children often forego their earned benefits because they have no means to afford child care. Currently, VA has four pilot programs which offer on-site child care. These programs have been successful in increasing access to services for veterans. The VFW supports this bill, which would provide child care so homeless veterans have the opportunity to complete the training they need to obtain meaningful employment.

Discussion Draft, BRAVE Act (Boosting Rates of American Veteran Employment Act)

The VFW supports this proposal to incentivize and reward companies for employing veterans. We also support the proposed debarment of companies contracting with VA that willfully and intentionally misrepresent the percentage of veteran employees. Employing veterans and working to serve veterans through VA should be a privilege and not something to be taken advantage of.

Discussion Draft, to clarify seasoning requirements for certain refinanced mortgage loans, and for other purposes.

The VFW understands there were unintended consequences affecting upwards of 2,500 users of VA's home loan program who were seeking to refinance their mortgages. We feel this correction should be made in order to not unintentionally hurt those Ginnie Mae was trying to protect.

Discussion Draft, Navy SEAL Chief Petty Officer William "Bill" Mulder (Ret.) Transition Improvement Act

The VFW proudly supports this proposal which would ease the burden of transition for service members. The period of moving from active duty to civilian life can be challenging for transitioning service members (TSMs). Leaving a structured life in the military and moving to an entirely different atmosphere brings with it many difficulties. Finding a new job, moving away from base, going to school, or leaving friends and comrades are just some of the issues service members face during the military to civilian transition.

Through the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), the Department of Defense in cooperation with the Department of Labor, the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Small Business Administration, ensures service members have a seamless path to civilian life. TAP has improved drastically over the past few years, but there are still many ways to further improve this vital program.

The John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 revised the structure of the TAP program to make sure TSMs could attend the career track program they want, instead of providing it as an additional option. The start date for beginning TAP class was also revised so TSMs could take the class earlier and, if possible, more than once before separation.

Connecting TSMs to resources in the communities where they are relocating is an important step that should happen during TAP classes. Providing connections to organizations that offer employment training, education information, and financial or legal assistance is beneficial in a seamless transition, and must be part of the TAP class so TSMs can begin to make these connections before they separate.

Another key area that needs to be addressed is the ability for veterans to access TAP-style information and resources after they leave military service. Reopening a pilot program to offer TAP in the community for veterans is an excellent way to provide such access. Once veterans reintegrate into their communities, it is important for them to be able to access specific transition resources that apply strictly to their local communities. Veterans who participated in TAP in the community pilot program were able to access information and resources they may have missed during their initial TAP classes.

VET OPP Act

Currently, the Economic Opportunity (EO) programs are enmeshed with the myriad of entities that make up the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). Compensation, being the largest program, dominates the attention of the VBA which makes it difficult for the EO programs to get adequate funding, specialized resources, and other prioritization. For example, while the VBA has been focused on the modernization and streamlining of the claims and appeals process, other important programs such as VR&E have seen a stagnation of resources and oversight.

Veterans service organizations (VSOs) agree that an under secretary for EO programs would provide VA the ability to better manage EO programs. This subcommittee, which focuses exclusively on EO programs, further emphasizes the advantage of having a central point of contact for accountability and oversight. VA, Department of Defense, and the Department of Labor collaborate to manage the Transition Assistance Program for out-processing service members, but efforts have been hampered by the lack of an under secretary for EO to act as a counterpart and coordinate efforts at VA. Since VA does not have the primary role in TAP, we believe having an under secretary would help ensure that VA's views on TAP initiatives and resources are enhanced.

This nation should have as much focus on the economic opportunities of her veterans as it does on their health care and benefits. In reality, not all veterans seek VA health care when they are discharged; they do not need assistance from the National Cemetery Administration; nor are they all seeking disability compensation. However, the vast majority are looking for gainful employment and/or education. 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 the VBA all programs currently in the EO jurisdiction and create a fourth administration under 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 create that central point of contact for VSOs and Congress.

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.

The VFW supports this bill, which would eliminate the current cap on the amount VA is authorized to guarantee under the VA Home Loan Guaranty Program. Since the 1940s, this excellent benefit has enabled veterans to finance a low-cost mortgage to purchase a home and become part of America's middle class. The price of real estate has significantly increased in recent years, but the amount VA is able to guarantee has not. Veterans in high cost-of-living areas are now forced to contribute costly upfront down payments to guarantee their home loans with VA. This barrier prohibits veterans from achieving their dreams of becoming homeowners.

This bill would rightfully exempt service members who have been awarded the Purple Heart from paying requisite VA home loan funding fees. Veterans who have service-connected disabilities are exempt from paying such funding fees. Service members who have illnesses or injuries related to their service must also be offered the opportunity to become homeowners without being required to pay a funding fee.

Discussion Draft, to make certain improvements to the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship program of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The VFW supports removing the specific credit hours language for the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship. The VFW supported the extension of entitlements for STEM students. If this specific requirement is a barrier for students to receive the extension, then it should be removed. Education for veterans is a top priority for the VFW, and we especially want to see veterans succeed in high-demand fields like STEM.

Discussion Draft, 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.

The VFW supports expanded eligibility of this scholarship to children and spouses of members of the reserve component of the Armed Forces. Any dependent or spouse of a service member who dies from service-connected injuries or illness, regardless of activation status, should be treated equally.

Discussion Draft, to improve the ability of veterans to receive in-state tuition using educational assistance administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

The VFW supports this proposal to improve the ability of veterans to receive in-state tuition. The VFW has called for in-state tuition rates for years, and this change is long overdue. Offering in-state tuition for all GI Bill users helps remove another barrier for student veterans to pursue their educational goals.

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 this subcommittee. I am prepared to take any questions you or the subcommittee members may have.

Information Required by Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, the VFW has not received any federal grants in Fiscal Year 2019, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.

The VFW has not received payments or contracts from any foreign governments in the current year or preceding two calendar years.