

**STATEMENT OF
WILLIAM STREITBERGER
DIRECTOR, VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION & EMPLOYMENT
VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

JUNE 4, 2019

Good morning, Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss Evaluating the Effectiveness of VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program. I am deeply honored and privileged to appear before you today not only as the Executive Director of the VR&E program but as a proud recipient of this benefit and alumnus. I would not be testifying before you today had it not been for the tremendous contribution this program has had on my personal and professional life. Today, I am excited to share with you VR&E's historic modernization efforts to provide program participants with the benefits they have earned in a manner that honors their service.

VR&E Program Overview and Management

The mission of the VR&E program is to assist Servicemembers and Veterans with service-connected disabilities and barriers to employment prepare for, find, and maintain suitable employment. Rehabilitation services provided to VR&E participants fall under one of the following five tracks:

- **Reemployment with Previous Employer:** For individuals who are separating from active duty or in the National Guard or Reserves and are returning to work for their previous employer.
- **Rapid Access to Employment:** For individuals who either wish to obtain employment soon after separation or who already have the necessary skills to be competitive in the job market in an appropriate occupation.
- **Self-Employment:** For individuals who have limited access to traditional employment, need flexible work schedules, or who require more accommodation in the work environment due to their disabling conditions or other life circumstances.
- **Employment Through Long-Term Services:** For individuals who need specialized training and/or education to obtain and maintain suitable employment.
- **Independent Living Services:** For individuals who are not currently able to work and need rehabilitation services to live more independently.

Ninety-six percent of program participants are currently in the Employment through Long-Term Services track. Given that most Veterans in the VR&E program require significant support and re-training to obtain a suitable job, it stands to reason that this is the most widely used employment track. The services provided under this track include payment of all training costs, associated fees, books, supplies, and other required resources that are necessary for achievement of a suitable career goal.

Generally, Veterans must complete a program within 12 years from their separation from military service or within 12 years from the date VA notifies them that they have a compensable service-connected disability. Depending on the length of program needed, Veterans may be provided up to 48 months of full-time services or their part-time equivalent. These limitations may be extended in certain circumstances.

Currently, there are nearly 1,100 professional Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (VRC) who deliver services through a network of nearly 350 field locations reporting up to their Regional Office (RO) of jurisdiction. These offices support Servicemembers and Veterans where they are located which currently includes 56 ROs, the National Capital Regional Benefits Office (NCRBO), approximately 142 VR&E out-based offices, 71 military installations for the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES), and 104 VetSuccess On Campus schools/sites.

VR&E works with VBA's Office of Field Operations to provide oversight, policy guidance, communications, and advice to the field structure. As the Executive Director of VR&E, I communicate with the field on a daily basis and am heavily involved in all aspects of VR&E program field operations. Since coming on board in September 2018, I have instituted a comprehensive Change Management strategy to support Servicemembers, Veterans, family members, employees, and key stakeholders through the modernization process. I have traveled throughout the country conducting modernization townhalls to share VR&E's vision for program excellence and to engage in discussion with both VA Central Office and operational staff on key topics of interest and concern and solicit critical input to help guide and shape the future of our program. These listening sessions have included customer-centered design focus groups with student Veterans who have been instrumental in informing and shaping the modernization process. I will continue to do this at every possible opportunity. VR&E has a Field Advisory and Change Committee (FACC) that is actively involved in rolling out the vision and messaging key changes and new initiatives. FACC meets once each quarter.

There are three significant initiatives currently underway to strengthen VR&E's ability to monitor and ensure proper program execution and compliance. First, in partnership with our District Offices, the VR&E program office (in VACO) will expand its ability to provide program oversight by 80 percent, in partnership with our District Offices. Our new model will ensure collaborative oversight of each RO, every fiscal year. Second, VR&E's Quality Assurance (QA) Transformation will increase program effectiveness and efficiency through new instruments tailored to better evaluate compliance and performance using an issue-based scoring methodology, a statistically

valid sampling methodology, and a revised QA Web system where both the local and national reviews will be completed in the same system to allow for comparative analysis. QA modernization will enable us to get a more accurate picture of the performance of our program and the areas needed for targeted training of staff at the national, RO, and individual level. Third, technology initiatives will increase our capability to monitor and assess program operations, enforce compliance, expand access controls, drive higher quality outcomes, and eliminate service delivery inconsistencies.

VR&E Program Outcomes

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2018, our highly skilled and dedicated counselors assisted 15,997 Veterans to achieve a positive outcome. This is an increase of 3 percent from Fiscal Year (FY) 2017 and includes the following:

- 10,735 Employment rehabilitations
- 597 Independent Living rehabilitations
- 794 Education rehabilitations
- 603 Maximum Rehabilitation Gain (MRG) - employed
- 3,268 Maximum Rehabilitation Gain – employable

MRGs account for where VR&E contributed substantively to a Veteran's success in achieving employment or continuing education, where the goal may differ from the original rehabilitation plan objective.

In addition, VR&E continued to engage, address, and resolve the number of program participants in a case status that has been open for more than 10 years. Since this initiative started in July 2015, program participants in this status decreased by 63 percent. This has helped in increasing the achievement of more positive outcomes.

VR&E has implemented a new program metric in FY 2019—the VR&E Program Growth Rate, which measures the percentage of Veterans who have been determined to be entitled to the program and enter a plan of services. This metric will help us focus on increasing participants in the program. To support increased program growth, we are preparing to deploy Artificial Intelligence capabilities to streamline appointment scheduling, reminders, and simplify other communication touch points. This is one of many optimization advancements we will discuss today.

FY 2019 marks the 10-year anniversary of the Vetsuccess on Campus (VSOC) program. The VSOC program began as a pilot in 2009; since then, the program has undergone multiple expansions. The most recent occurred in FY 2018 when an additional 8 VSOC counselors were assigned to 10 new schools in the country. The VSOC program now has 87 counselors, who serve 104 Institutions of Higher Learning across the country. In FY 2018, over 86,000 student Veterans, Servicemembers, and dependents attended a VSOC school and had access to a VSOC counselor. VSOC counselors provided services to 44,687 of these students.

VR&E continues to collaborate with the Department of Defense to provide VR&E services to Active Duty, Reserve, and National Guard Servicemembers through the IDES program. There are 145 IDES counselors at 71 military installations across the Nation. These counselors provide early intervention counseling and other available services to IDES participants and other wounded, ill, and injured Servicemembers. In collaboration with the U.S. Army's Warrior Transition Command, staff members jointly visit select IDES sites to improve the referral process and services at these military installations. The Committee's long-term support for automatic VR&E entitlement for wounded, ill, and injured Servicemembers is greatly appreciated.

VR&E also continues to collaborate with the U.S. Department of Labor and the public workforce systems in each state and territory. Together, we work to ensure that enrolled Veterans receive labor market information to assist them in making informed decisions about selecting their rehabilitative training program. This referral process assists each Veteran in getting the best information and service available through each of these partners.

VR&E continues to support transitioning Servicemembers, Veterans, and qualified dependents who are eligible for VA education benefits. This program (Educational and Vocational Counseling) is authorized under title 38, United States Code, Chapter 36, and offers a wide range of services, including but not limited to adjustment counseling, vocational testing, educational and career counseling, and VA benefits coaching. These services are available to most Servicemembers within 6 months of their anticipated discharge, Veterans within 1-year post-discharge, or any Servicemember, Veteran, or dependent that is eligible for specified VA education benefits. VR&E is collaborating with the Office of Transition and Economic Development (TED) to create a new strategy and vehicle for contracted title 38, chapter 36, services currently managed by VR&E, which is responsive to the needs of student Veterans and transitioning Servicemembers. Chapter 36 benefits offer a wide range of educational and vocational counseling services to Servicemembers, Veterans, and dependents who are eligible for one of the VA's educational benefit programs.

Also, we have consistently heard Veterans say that they did not remember hearing about the VR&E program in their Transition Assistance Program (TAP) classes. While the TAP curriculum includes content on VR&E services, we recognize that we need to improve upon how this content is delivered. In previous testimony Ms. Margarita Devlin, the Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Benefits, informed this committee that VA will be improving upon the TAP curriculum with the ability to add additional time based on the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act. VR&E Service is collaborating with TED to ensure that we incorporate Veteran feedback into the improvements to the VR&E program content.

Training for VR&E staff is a major focus; four new counselor training, instructor-led, and Web-based sessions have been conducted this fiscal year. Approximately 156 new counselors who were hired have attended these sessions. The

training focused on policy and procedures and was designed to enhance the knowledge and skill sets of the newly-hired counselors.

VR&E Longitudinal Study

VR&E service has continued tracking Veteran cohorts in the congressionally mandated 20-year longitudinal study. This study of Veterans who began their VR&E programs in FY 2010, 2012, and 2014 has provided an abundance of information including detailed analysis of cohort trends and Veteran satisfaction with VR&E services. From last year's iteration of the study, we found that nearly 90 percent of participants for all cohorts reported moderate to high program satisfaction; women make up a larger percentage of the program participants (17–20 percent); and about two-thirds of cohort members have a service-connected disability rating of about 60 percent or higher. The study also revealed that almost one-quarter or more of participants in each cohort have a primary rating for posttraumatic stress disorder, and around 90 percent of Veterans who have achieved rehabilitation from an employment plan were employed in the past year. The study further indicates that Veterans who successfully complete the VR&E program report more positive economic outcomes to include higher employment rates, number of months worked, annual earnings, annual and individual income, and home ownership, as compared to those Veterans who discontinued their participation in the VR&E program over time.

Rehabilitation remains one of the most dominant variables driving positive financial outcomes. Therefore, we know that keeping our Veterans in the program until completion, is a key factor to their success. Our “Modernization and Transformation” efforts will greatly assist in improving rehabilitation outcomes.

VR&E Modernization & Transformation

VR&E has embarked on a comprehensive multi-year modernization effort to improve customer service by streamlining processes and modernizing systems. VR&E Service, in conjunction with the Office of Business Process Integration and the Office of Information and Technology (OIT), has developed and is moving forward with an overarching plan to incrementally modernize VR&E by streamlining several of the administrative functions with existing technology solutions to include implementation of the Case Management Solution System (CMSS). CMSS will replace VR&E's existing 20-year old legacy system, Corporate Waco, Indianapolis, Newark, Roanoke, Seattle (CWINRS). Requests for information from industry in FY 2018 yielded valuable information on commercially available products. VR&E will leverage Software as a Service which will enable VR&E to grow with technology and re-engineer processes to support digital and paperless initiatives. We anticipate award before the end of FY 2019 to acquire these capabilities.

Concurrently, VR&E is pursuing a wide-reaching modernization effort that will include numerous opportunities to incrementally leverage existing people, processes,

and technology to more efficiently prepare us to seamlessly transition into the new CMSS. These include:

- **Virtual Assistant:** Artificial Intelligence platform which will enable routine bidirectional electronic communication with Veterans through either text message or email. This technology is readily available in the marketplace with similar applications successfully employed in other industries such as Medical, Hospitality, and Banking.
- **VA Video Connect:** The new VA Video Connect application for tele-counseling connects Veterans with their counselors from virtually anywhere, using encryption to ensure a secure and private session. The app makes VR&E appointments more convenient and reduces the travel time for Veterans, especially those in rural areas. It allows quick and easy access from any mobile or Web-based device (desktop, smartphone, or tablet). Tele-counseling is a service delivery option that provides the capability to meet Veterans on their terms, creating greater flexibility, convenience, and access. Since deployed in November 2018, VR&E has seen an increase in usage of over 200 percent averaging over 1,000 VA Video Connect appointments per month using this updated platform. It is clear that Veterans and VR&E counselors are embracing the functionality and flexibility that this option provides.
- **e-Invoicing:** The Invoice Payment Processing System (IPPS) is an electronic invoicing platform which will enable vendors to receive electronic authorizations from and submit electronic invoices directly to VR&E. Once implemented, this capability will standardize as well as streamline the invoice payment process, significantly reducing the amount of time needed to receive, process, and pay vendors.
- **Paperless Claims Processing:** This will enable VR&E to store electronic records within the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS) eFolder, enabling electronic access to Veteran case files, moving VR&E toward a paperless work environment. The initiative began in Quarter 1 of FY 2019. Shipping of closed files to the scanning vendor will enable these files to be digitized, labeled (taxonomy), and stored electronically in the VBMS eFolder. It also supports VBA's ability to test this process for VR&E records, system functionality, and will minimize impact on employees serving participants in an active case status. Once scanned, files will be easily accessible and readily available for case management in a fully-electronic claims processing environment. This builds upon existing investments in VBA's modernization efforts.
- **Centralized Mail:** Will expand and enhance available features of the current centralized mail process utilized by Compensation Service to develop a separate digital portal for VR&E mail. Centralized Mail will streamline the receipt, processing, and filing of received mail potentially reducing mail processing time

by 75 percent. Physical mail will be received in a central location, scanned, and then disseminated to the receiving VR&E office through the dedicated VR&E Centralized Mail portal.

As VR&E implements these changes, counselors will be able to manage workload more efficiently and effectively, allowing more time to provide high-quality counseling and employment services to VR&E participants.

Concluding Remarks

Mr. Chairman, VR&E Service, leadership, and the field continue to move in the direction of modernizing and transforming this very consequential program. With the implementation of these initiatives between now and Quarter 1 FY 2021, VR&E will strive toward both substantially improving and enhancing the VR&E program. With the implementation of each component, we will assess the impact and improvement on the delivery of vocational rehabilitation services to our Servicemembers and Veterans with service-connected disabilities.

My vision is to continually challenge the status quo, to think differently to provide Veterans with the benefits they have earned in a manner that honors their service, in the way they want to be served, that VR&E be a modern 21st Century facilitator of economic opportunity for Servicemembers, Veterans, and their families – the crown jewel of VBA's benefits portfolio.

This concludes my statement, Mr. Chairman. I would be pleased to answer any questions from you, the Ranking Member, and other members of the Subcommittee.