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BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**

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Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Bilirakis and other Members of the Subcommittee. I am pleased to be here today to discuss the topic of getting Veterans back to work as the country adjusts to the COVID-19 crisis, and to share how the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is supporting Veterans with their employment and career goals as the country adjusts to the pandemic and its aftermath.

We all acknowledge that the employment landscape is precarious for many during these uncertain times. VA's challenge during this fast-moving crisis was to continue to be a trusted, accessible resource for our transitioning Service members, Veterans and their families. Now, more than ever, ensuring availability and accessibility of reliable information, services, resources and benefits are critical for Veteran well-being. VA adapted swiftly and was innovative throughout these trying times, and we did not skip a beat in taking care of our Nation's heroes.

Within VA, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) has overall responsibility for the provision of services to enable successful military to civilian transition. VBA is also responsible for assisting eligible Veterans and dependents with achieving overall economic well-being through a holistic suite of benefit programs. VBA has continued serving Veterans and other eligible beneficiaries throughout the pandemic without any break in service, and we have adjusted our policies and how we deliver benefits to ensure maximum protections are in place for Veterans to stay safe while continuing to apply for and receive the benefits to which they may be entitled. In addition to changes VBA made to internal processes, timely legislation has also helped us to adapt certain programs to ensure Veterans receive the support they need. Although VBA had to close our physical Regional Office buildings to the public for everyone's safety, VBA's dedicated employees have continued to work, in telework status, to deliver benefits in a manner that honors our Veterans.

Economic Well-Being

Within VBA, we have several programs to support Veterans in preparing for, obtaining and maintaining productive employment. We provide education benefits to ensure Veterans have the skills and credentials to compete in the job market; we offer outreach and personalized career counseling to ensure they have the support and guidance to select their education and career paths; we provide military-to-civilian

transition support; and we provide direct skills provision and readiness for jobs within VA. We also offer support for home purchase, a cornerstone of the American Dream. VBA partners with the Department of Labor (DOL) and other stakeholders on military and Veteran-focused employment events. Most importantly, we conduct targeted recruitment and hire Veterans, as evidenced by the fact that over 50% of VBA's employees are Veterans themselves.

Because employment is an essential part of much of what we do in VBA, I will discuss the efforts of each VBA business line engaged in employment-related activities separately.

Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E)

On June 22, 2020, VBA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Service (VR&E) changed its name to Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E). This name change is the result of a human-centered design research effort conducted to better understand the program's strengths, weaknesses, pain points and opportunities from the Veteran's perspective. We learned that there was confusion around the former name, a general misunderstanding of the services provided, and stigma attached to the former name that deterred some potential participants from seeking services. In particular, the terms "vocational" and "rehabilitation" led to misconceptions about the program.

The new name, Veteran Readiness and Employment, was developed in consultation with Veterans and other stakeholders and puts the emphasis on the Veteran and VR&E's mission to help them reach their employment goals. We are excited about this name change and look forward to being able to enhance our service to Veterans and ensure eligible Veterans who may benefit from VR&E services choose to participate.

VR&E provides all services and assistance necessary to support eligible Veterans with disabilities to prepare for, obtain and maintain employment. This can include education, training, employment accommodations, resumé development and job-seeking skills coaching. VR&E may also assist eligible Veterans with starting their own business. In response to COVID-19, VR&E immediately expanded the use of tele-counseling in order to continue providing services to program participants. In addition, moving to the use of electronic communications and centralized mail enabled us to enhance and expand our ability to provide uninterrupted service to our Veterans and stakeholders.

The recent passage of two new laws, Public Law (P.L.) 116-128, which was signed on March 21, 2020, and P.L. 116-140, Student Veteran Coronavirus Response Act of 2020, which was signed into law on April 28, 2020, provided Veterans participating in the VR&E program with opportunities to continue their training programs leading to suitable employment.

For those Veterans that elected to receive the Post 9/11 subsistence allowance, P.L. 116-128, authorized VA to continue providing monthly subsistence allowances and monthly housing stipends for courses that were converted “from being offered on-site at an educational institution” (in-residence) to “being offered by distance learning” (an on-line format) due to the COVID-19 pandemic using the in-residence rate, which is usually substantially higher than the rate available when courses are attended online. This amendment to the law ensured that VR&E participants were able to continue their training without experiencing a decrease in their monthly subsistence allowance.

P.L. 116-140, Student Veteran Coronavirus Response Act of 2020, provides additional temporary authorities related to monthly subsistence allowance payments, such as allowing an additional period of 4 weeks of subsistence allowance payments if an educational facility temporarily closes, so that students may receive 8 weeks of continued subsistence allowance during a 12-month period for temporary closures when combined with existing authority. Existing law also provides for the continuation of the subsistence allowance for up to 120 days when an educational facility permanently closes, providing VR&E participants with assurance and continuity during these uncertain times. In each of these scenarios, VR&E participants may also qualify for a restoration of entitlement they may have lost due to the closure of the training facility.

P.L. 116-140 further authorized VR&E to provide two additional months of subsistence allowance to VR&E participants who have completed training and are currently seeking employment in a time when the unemployment rate is approaching an all-time high. This has been a welcome and much needed benefit to these Veterans, who were not employed at the start of the pandemic and, therefore, did not qualify for the increased weekly unemployment benefits or the payroll protection options authorized by the CARES Act (P.L. 116-136, title I, § 1102, title II, §2102(d)).

Finally, under the provisions of P.L. 116-140, VR&E now has the authority to extend the 12-year eligibility period for the VR&E program, extend the subsistence allowance paid to those pursuing employment services; and restore entitlement in certain situations. These actions serve to mitigate rehabilitation time lost during the pandemic and ensure that Veterans have access to services and can complete the goals outlined in their rehabilitation plan, which greatly increases the likelihood of obtaining and maintaining employment after the pandemic.

Each of these provisions are temporary. They are in effect from March 1, 2020, through December 21, 2020.

VA looks forward to the opportunity to work with Congress on legislation to assist Veterans with obtaining employment within existing job training programs after the pandemic by ensuring that each has the skills needed to compete in what will be a very competitive labor market.

One of the two main purposes of the VR&E program is to provide all services and assistance necessary to help Veterans with disabilities to prepare for, obtain and

maintain employment. Data indicates that VR&E is very effective in meeting this goal. To date this fiscal year, VR&E has successfully assisted 11,538 Veterans to achieve positive outcomes as a result of their participation in the program. Of those, 60% achieved direct employment, 36% were suitably prepared for employment through education or training, and 4% achieved independence in their daily living.

Veterans are eligible to apply for VR&E benefits if they have a service-connected disability of 10% or higher or are transitioning from the military and expect to receive a disability claim. Claims processing delays as a result of VA suspending in-person Compensation and Pension (C&P) exams for the safety of our Veterans, has impacted the volume of claims received by VR&E. March through June FY2019 yielded 39,782 VR&E applicants, whereas the same period under COVID-19, VR&E received 30,185 applicants. Overall COVID-19 induced a 24% decrease in VR&E's claims processed for the same time period over fiscal years. VA has steadily been ramping up in-person C&P exams in locations across the country based on gating criteria. As more Veterans receive their disability ratings, VR&E will see increasing numbers of applications. VR&E has continued to maintain its timeliness of claims processing during the pandemic. Our average number of days from date of application to notification of entitlement decision is 37 days, which is better than our target of 45 days. Our average number of days in evaluation and planning until development of a rehabilitation plan is approved, is 90 days, which is better than our target of 105 days.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, VR&E Service is developing a new modernization initiative for the expansion of standardized employment services. The new model will have a structured approach for job development and marketing of the VR&E program to national, regional and local business partners. Eight National Account Managers, assigned to VR&E Service, will work with Regional and District Offices to create national and local labor market profiles that will be used to match job-ready Veterans participating in the VR&E program with available employment opportunities. This will be implemented during the 4th quarter of fiscal year (FY) 2020.

To further assist program participants with securing employment during the COVID-19 pandemic, VR&E Service's Employment team has instituted monthly collaboration sessions with VR&E field offices to determine best practices for preparing Veterans for employment during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

VR&E Service has continued its long-standing relationship with DOL, focusing in the areas of job placement services to assist program participants with securing employment. In addition, the targeted labor market information provided by DOL ensures VR&E is preparing Veterans with the marketable skills needed to compete in the current job market. Recently, this partnership has expanded to include a collaboration with focusing on increasing the utilization of apprenticeships within the VR&E program. A pilot of this initiative, including a formal training program for both VR&E and DOL staff is slated for October 2020.

The VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) program assists Service members, Veterans and eligible dependents to succeed in their educational goals. Participants in the VSOC program receive personalized support to guide their career paths, ensure effective use of VA benefits, and achieve their educational and career goals. VSOC Counselors provide adjustment counseling, vocational testing, educational and career counseling, expedited VR&E services, and general support and assistance. There are currently 104 VSOC schools that are served by 87 VSOC Counselors across the Nation. As campuses across the Nation moved to virtual environments, our VSOC counselors adapted to this by expanding the use of tele-counseling to maintain contact and consistency in serving program participants.

Education

VA's education programs provide education and training benefits to eligible Service members, Veterans, dependents and survivors. These programs are designed to assist Veterans in readjusting to civilian life, help the Armed Forces both recruit and retain members, and enhance the Nation's economic competitiveness through the development of a more highly educated and productive workforce.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill, which became effective on August 1, 2009, is the most utilized of VA's education programs. In fiscal year 2019, 714,346 individuals received education benefits under this program. It is a powerful tool that positions Veterans, Service members and their families for meaningful careers in today's economy. This program provides educational assistance, generally in the form of tuition and fees, monthly housing allowance, and a books and supplies stipend, to assist Veterans and their families in reaching their educational or vocational goals. The Post-9/11 GI Bill also offers job training through on-the-job (OJT) and apprenticeship programs and the opportunity to earn money through VA's work-study program.

As of July 16, 2020, Education Service (EDU) pending inventory is 26,022 claims which is a 60% decrease in inventory compared to the same time last year (65,689 claims). Timeliness for the month of July is 10.4 days for original claims and 4.6 days for supplemental claims, while timeliness fiscal year to date is 15.0 days for originals and 7.1 days for supplementals. Both metrics exceed EDU targets of 28 days for originals and 14 days for supplementals. At this time last year, EDU timeliness for July was 23.2 days for originals and 10.5 days for supplementals, while timeliness fiscal year to date was 24.1 days for originals and 14.4 days for supplementals. Since March 2020, EDU has processed over 1.1M claims with a processing time of 11.2 days for original claims and 4.6 days for supplemental claims.

OJT and apprenticeship programs allow Veterans to learn a trade or skill through training on the job rather than attending a program comprised primarily, or solely, of formal classroom instruction. A Veteran generally enters into a training contract for a specific period with an employer or union, and, at the end of the training period, the Veteran gains job certification or journeyman status. Since Veterans are only paid benefits for hours worked, a Veteran being furloughed as a result of COVID-19 would

have resulted in GI Bill benefits being suspended during the furlough. However, VA has interpreted 38 U.S.C. § 3680(a)(2)(A) as well as Public Law 116-140, Student Veteran Coronavirus Response Act of 2020, section 4(a)(2), to apply to furloughed OJT/APP trainees. Therefore, VA has authorized continued benefits payments for 4 weeks for furloughed OJT/APP trainees.

VA is experiencing tremendous success with the Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) 5-year pilot program that provides tuition and housing assistance to help Veterans advance in an information technology (IT) career. Through VET TEC training programs, Veterans acquire high-tech skills to assist them in moving quickly into in-demand jobs in the following five areas: information science, computer programming, data processing, media applications and computer science. VET TEC training programs are typically shorter than traditional college programs – usually a VET TEC program runs from 6 to 28 weeks in length – which allows Veterans to more rapidly complete training and enter the job market. Since launching the VET TEC program on April 1, 2019, VA has certified entitlement to 15,065 eligible Veterans; 641 Veterans are currently enrolled; and 184 Veterans have secured employment. Due to the popularity of the VET TEC program, and in part due to COVID-19, VA has already exhausted the annual \$15 million fiscal year budget cap for FY 2020; therefore, no new Veterans will be allowed to participate in the program for the remainder of the fiscal year, unless Congress authorizes additional funding. VA is encouraging Veterans to continue to apply for a VET TEC Certificate of Eligibility, but any new Veteran will have to wait until October 1, 2020, to begin training when additional funding will be available.

VA appreciates the Committee's attention on increasing Veteran employment during this time in our Nation, and we would be happy to work with the Committee to ensure any future legislation provides authorities for VA to continue to work with Veterans who have experienced employment barriers as a result of this current crisis.

VA continues to work closely with DOL to improve and increase employment opportunities for Veterans. Currently, DOL and VA are coordinating to implement the requirements of the Support for Veterans in Effective Apprenticeships Act of 2019, P.L. 116-134. Once implemented, this law will ensure that employers are fully aware of GI Bill benefits for Veterans, and that State Approving Agencies (SAA) are provided the names and contact information for all of the sponsors that have programs registered by DOL, potentially allowing for an increase in apprenticeship programs that will be approved. In addition, VA collaborated with DOL to implement the requirements in the Veterans Apprenticeship and Labor Opportunity Reform Act, or VALOR Act (P.L. 115-89), which streamlined the approval application process for sponsors who had multi-state apprenticeship program approval by DOL. VA and DOL participated in numerous conference calls to provide information to sponsors on the application process. VA also collaborates with the Department of Agriculture, which hired 1900 Veterans last year and has numerous programs to assist transitioning Servicemembers and Veterans.

As mentioned previously, VBA's Education Service is also working with DOL and VBA's VR&E Service to increase participation in apprenticeship programs. Together, they participated on a work group with DOL for the DOL VETS Apprenticeship Pilot. The work group will provide transparency; discuss best practices; increase efficiencies for VA and DOL; ensure that information is up to date; and provide the best possible information and services for Veterans and VR&E counselors. Full kickoff of the pilot is scheduled for October 2020.

Transition and Economic Development

VBA's Office of Transition and Economic Development (TED) is dedicated to easing the military-to-civilian transition journey and brings together government, Veteran Service Organizations, nonprofits and private industry to collaborate without barriers to provide transitioning Service members, Veterans and their families with a world-class experience that honors their service. The programs and services managed by TED serve as an integral part of VA's broader effort to better coordinate and promote the full continuum of internal and external transition support to help transitioning Service members and Veterans plan for and experience a successful transition to civilian life.

VBA military-to-civilian transition programs are designed to give Veterans the best possible start to their post-military lives. The VA Benefits and Services course, as part of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), helps Service members understand how to navigate VA and the benefits and services they've earned through their military careers. VA TAP provides the skill building, resources, and tools Service members need to achieve emotional health, physical health and economic stability in civilian life and become career ready. VBA and DOL coordinated course content to ensure that VBA and DOL's TAP courses are complementary to each other and not redundant, to ensure a meaningful and seamless experience for transitioning Service members. More than 180,000 Service members attend the VA Benefits and Services course annually. Since February 2020, DOL Veterans' Employment and Training Service Office (VETS) has met regularly with VBA leaders to discuss economic impacts on transitioning Service members and Veterans. Discussion topics include training, education, employment partnership and ways to leverage efforts across the TAP interagency partnership to support transitioning Service members and Veterans during this economic downturn. During COVID-19, VA's TAP courses are being provided virtually, using the Department of Defense's (DoD) Joint Knowledge Online (JKO) Learning Management System (LMS). From April 1, 2020 to May 31, 2020, over 27,000 participants completed the VA Benefits and Services course via JKO. In addition, VA Benefits Advisors are still available to all Service members, Veterans, and military families worldwide for remote one-on-one assistance sessions through phone and email. Since April 1, 2020, and as of July 15, 2020, VA Benefits Advisors conducted 18,215 remote One-On-One Assistance sessions worldwide.

DoD and VA share an important role in improving the lives and well-being of Service members who are separating from the military into civilian life. Recognizing this joint responsibility, on September 13, 2019, the DoD-VA Joint Executive Committee

(JEC) Co-chairs approved a new framework which codifies the transition period as beginning 365 days prior to separation and extending to 365 days post separation. This framework, referred to as the Military to Civilian Readiness Pathway (M2C Ready), is a comprehensive integrated Service member to Veteran pathway that leverages Federal agencies partnerships, VA benefits and services, Veterans Service Organizations and other existing community resources in a holistic approach to a smooth transition.

VBA and DoD's Office of Force Resiliency are jointly leading the effort to begin operationalizing M2C Ready. VA and DoD will coordinate efforts to help connect Service members and Veterans to the services and benefits they have earned at the earliest possible transition touchpoint. M2C Ready has a goal of 100% participation for all eligible Service members and Veterans. M2C Ready efforts will help to identify gaps, or failure points in the transition process and devise the best approach to conduct a warm handoff from transitioning Service member to VA's services and programs prior to leaving the military and before a point of crisis.

On December 2, 2019, VBA launched VA Solid Start (VASS), an implementation action resulting from Joint Action Plan Task 1.1, a directive of Executive Order 13822, Supporting Our Veterans During Their Transition from Uniformed Service to Civilian Life. Led by VBA, this initiative represents a collaborative effort among VA, DoD and the Department of Homeland Security. The primary goal of VASS is to provide early and consistent, caring contact to transitioning Service members for 1 year after military separation. VBA operationalized the concept of consistent, caring contact through prescribed proactive, personal interactions that center on the needs of former Service members. VASS calls are Veteran-driven. Topics covered are of interest to the individual Veteran and can include employment, health care, mental health, disability compensation, insurance, and home loan guaranty to name a few. VASS representatives follow up each call with a personal email that covers the information and resources discussed during the call and requested by the Veteran.

Under VASS, experienced VA representatives call former Service members at three intervals during their first year of transition to civilian life to discuss their transition and any challenges the new Veteran may be facing. VASS calls are intended to increase Veterans' awareness of the benefits and services they have earned that can help them live healthy, fulfilling civilian lives. Additionally, VASS representatives are trained to recognize signs of crisis and immediately connect Veterans with the Veterans Crisis Line should the situation dictate. VASS has reached more than 73,125 Veterans since December 2019.

In response to COVID-19, VBA leveraged information provided by our DOL partner to tailor VASS content and scripts to address employment-related challenges and provide referral options that include information about unemployment benefits for recently transitioned Service members. In addition, agents received training to proactively recognize when to utilize the employment-related script based on their conversations with Veterans. In partnership with State Veterans Affairs Offices, VASS representatives are also able to refer Veterans to state-specific programs and services.

One of the programs TED is leveraging is the Chapter 36 Education and Vocational Counseling program. VBA has been involved in an intensive effort to take this program and re-imagine and re-brand it to make it more accessible to Veterans, Service members and beneficiaries and increase participation. Out of this effort, we now have the re-imagined Personalized Career Planning and Guidance (PCPG) program. In FY19, there were just over 6,700 participants and in FY20 through July 16, there have been approximately 4,500 participants. Effective October 2020, VA will maximize the \$6 million received from Congress to improve the economic well-being of Veterans, transitioning Service members and dependents. TED conducted a human-centered design study to determine what our beneficiaries need and what resonates with them. To assist transitioning Service members and Veterans with developing their individual path to economic well-being, PCPG offers tailored career and education counseling services that include the following: (1) resume support; (2) an education and employment plan; (3) a detailed skills assessment; (4) a personalized action plan to achieve education and career goals; (5) adjustment counseling to successfully transition to civilian employment; and (6) connection to VA benefits and services. PCPG also has a new tele-counseling component that will allow VA to assist Service members and Veterans virtually, thereby complying with COVID-19 social distancing guidelines.

VBA collaborates with DoD to develop training and employment opportunities for transitioning Service members. DoD's SkillBridge programs offer transitioning Service members valuable civilian work experience through training, apprenticeships or internships with more than 1,000 authorized partner organizations during their last 180 days of military service. The programs connect transitioning Service members with industry partners in relevant fields for real world job experiences.

Warrior Training Advancement Training Course (WARTAC) is an entry level DoD/VA SkillBridge education and employment opportunity for wounded warriors and transitioning Service members to complete a national-level VBA training program while still on active duty. Successful completion of the training program leads to an opportunity for Service members to be interviewed and possibly hired as a Veterans Service Representative (VSR) or a Rating Veterans Service Representative (RVSR) at one of VBA's 56 Regional Offices. This training program is taught in-person only on a military installation and allows the trainee to begin processing claims from day one at the Regional Office. Since program inception, VBA has offered VSR and RVSR positions to more than 1,400 transitioning Service members worldwide. VBA continues to work with all stakeholders to ensure WARTAC graduates are able to transition timely to their new careers in the midst of COVID-19. Travel and other logistical restrictions made necessary by the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in the cancellation of the remaining FY 2020 WARTAC classes. VA in partnership with DoD determined that WARTAC sessions will resume during the first quarter of FY 2021. Service members impacted by these cancellations will be eligible to attend future sessions at a participating military installation nearest their home.

Inspired by the success of WARTAC, VA's longest-running SkillBridge program, VA and DoD entered into a Memorandum of Understanding in December 2019 to

expand SkillBridge across any VA training and employment opportunities. TED is coordinating with organizations across the entire VA enterprise in fields from clinical care to law enforcement to identify and support development of new SkillBridge training and employment opportunities for transitioning Service members. Several new training programs are in development, which will create training and employment opportunities for transitioning Service members in other areas of VA. SkillBridge offers a unique opportunity to improve Veteran economic outcomes by training transitioning Service members for other VA job requirements prior to separating from the military and providing a smooth path into stable employment at VA post-separation.

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Office of Primary Care (OPC) developed a rapid hiring initiative in response to COVID-19 to hire Intermediate Care Technicians (ICT) at VA Medical Centers (VAMC). TED facilitated an employment training plan with DoD SkillBridge to promote the more than 1,200 ICT opportunities that are currently open on the DoD SkillBridge site and through other DoD leadership channels. In late March, VHA began recruitment efforts for medical personnel to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. As part of that effort, DoD SkillBridge honed its relationship with VHA and began promoting VHA's employment opportunities to transitioning military, Guard and Reserve members.

These additional marketing efforts paired with existing VHA efforts warranted a record total of 3,711 candidate referrals. Referrals indicate individuals who were deemed qualified and referred to be interviewed for the ICT position at local-level VAMCs. The Office of Primary Care does not yet have final hiring data because VA Medical Centers across the country continue to interview those referred candidates.

TED has developed the Economic Investment Initiative (EII) which leverages all VA benefits and services to support the economic well-being of transitioning Service members, Veterans, and their families and caregivers. EIIs are local initiatives in collaboration with Federal, State, and local government partners, VSOs, and private partners that connect Veterans who live in economically distressed communities with a community approach to improving their economic well-being. In 2019, we conducted EII events in Puerto Rico and Puget Sound. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, we recently conducted our first virtual EII in Jacksonville, NC.

In recognition of the need for a multi-sector solution to the economic and employment challenges faced by transitioning Service members during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, TED is devoting additional resources to harness the expertise of partnering Federal agencies, philanthropic and nonprofit sectors, and private industry through focused strategic partnerships to increase economic well-being for transitioning Service members and Veterans.

Loan Guaranty

VBA's Loan Guaranty (LGY) program promotes financial security through home ownership. On March 27, 2020, the President signed into law the Coronavirus Aid,

Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, P.L. 116-136. The CARES Act protects borrowers with Federally-backed mortgage loans who are experiencing financial hardship due to the COVID-19 national emergency. The CARES Act provides multiple protections for a VA-guaranteed loan, which include a defined forbearance period of up to 180 days, with the possibility for extending it for up to another 180 days; a foreclosure and eviction moratorium for 60 days starting March 18, 2020; and instructions on how mortgage servicers are to report to the credit agencies. As the CARES Act's moratorium neared the end of 60 days, VA issued one of its own, through August 31, 2020, on foreclosures of VA-guaranteed homes. VA borrowers experiencing financial hardship due to COVID-19 can review VA guidance for borrowers and either request forbearance through the mortgage loan servicer collecting their monthly payments or contact VA at 877-827-3702 to discuss their situation.

Additionally, LGY refers Veterans who feel they may be facing homelessness due to loss of employment to online resources at <http://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/NationalCallCenter.asp>, or advises Veterans to contact 877-424-3838, to receive immediate assistance from VA. LGY also works with VHA to make referrals as needed to VHA suicide prevention and mental health services for Veterans in need of support or assistance.

VA is experiencing record loan volume, currently trending a positive year over year change of 111%. Further, the VA Home Loan program has seen a 55% increase year over year in Certificate of Eligibility requests from Veterans, Servicemembers, and Lenders.

Economic Stimulus

While not specific to employment, VA recognized an opportunity to assist Veterans through a partnership with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) to ensure the Veterans and surviving spouses that we serve received Economic Impact Payments (EIP) timely. The IRS did an outstanding job of providing a viable solution for Americans that did not file a tax return to gain access to EIPs through their portal, but VA wanted to provide a safety net to ensure our most vulnerable beneficiaries (e.g., homeless Veterans and those that may not have the financial means for internet access) were not missed. VBA's Office of Financial Management provided IRS approximately 6 million data files for Compensation and Pension (C&P) recipients, and after excluding individuals who had already received their EIPs, IRS generated payments for 403,000 Veterans and survivors for a total of \$483.2 million. This is another example of VA's commitment to take the necessary steps to help Veterans and their families maintain economic stability during the pandemic.

Veterans Health Administration

Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) is a clinical vocational rehabilitation program offered by VHA, integrated within a Veteran's treatment. As a recovery program, CWT assists Veterans with employment challenges resulting from mental health, physical

and/or psychosocial issues to obtain and/or maintain meaningful employment through use of evidence-based and informed vocational rehabilitation models. Approximately 800 CWT vocational rehabilitation staff provide support to both the Veteran and the employer, to maximize job retention and success.

Addressing Veterans' employment needs is a critical component of VHA's health care services, since employment is protective for suicide, homelessness and substance use, and promotes overall health and well-being. Veterans served in CWT experience significant disabilities and vocational support needs, putting them at a disadvantage in competing for jobs, even more so when unemployment is high. More than ever, CWT services are needed to help Veterans connect with employers in their local communities. CWT staff are assisting Veterans with securing and/or maintaining employment as employer business models change, addressing Veteran safety on job sites related to the COVID-19 pandemic such as personal protective equipment and physical distancing for Veterans who have continued to work during this time, and assisting Veterans to negotiate safe return to work dates with their employers for those Veterans who have been laid off. CWT staff are using telephone and virtual means to connect with employers to assist Veterans in obtaining jobs and are providing skills training on virtual job search methods. CWT is connecting with partners to explore a national virtual hiring event for CWT Veterans and others who may be interested.

CWT staff have been provided guidance to maintain clinical contact with Veterans in CWT at a frequency similar to that of regular program standards, maximizing, to the extent possible, the use of non-face-to-face modalities, including VA Video Connect, Video on Demand, or telephone. VA Video Connect is VA's app to securely connect health care providers to Veterans for care through secure video conferencing. My HealthVet is VA's online personal health record, and allows for Secure Messaging, a web-based, encrypted communication between Veterans and health professionals. CWT staff are also assisting Veterans with face-to-face visits and meetings with employers utilizing local screening and safety protocols when necessary and clinically appropriate. CWT staff are working with Veterans during this time to assess their employment status, economic and employment needs and provide information on both VA and local community resources to meet their housing and food needs in addition to their employment needs.

CWT services are typically face-to-face services due to the intensity of supports provided; however, encounters using virtual modalities increased by over 800% (from 577 to 5,265) from February to April 2020. Data collection on COVID-related job loss among Veterans participating in CWT is underway. Approximately 8,000 Veterans received CWT services in June 2020, in comparison to 15,000 Veterans in June 2019. CWT Transitional Work was affected by restrictions imposed on outpatient services in many medical facilities; as outpatient services in medical facilities reopen, CWT participation rates are projected to return to and exceed previous levels of participation. Over 60,000 Veterans participated in CWT services in 2019, and with high unemployment rates and the anticipated challenges that Veterans with disabilities

experience, this number is anticipated to increase to the extent that CWT staffing resources allow.

Conclusion

VA is committed to providing the support necessary to ensure Veterans are positioned to return to work and achieve and maintain economic stability following the COVID-19 pandemic. VBA will leverage existing partnerships to continue to reach and recruit Veterans into our workforce.

This concludes my statement, Mr. Chairman. We are prepared to respond to any questions you or the other members of the Subcommittee may have.