

**STATEMENT OF
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DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY SUBCOMMITTEE**

July 20, 2021

Good morning Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore and other Members of the Subcommittee. I am pleased to be here with you today to discuss the status of VA's implementation of the education provisions in the *Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020*, P.L. 116-315.

For 77 years, the GI Bill has provided Veterans and their families with opportunities to enrich their lives; enhance their employment opportunities; and expand their economic horizons by providing more than \$400 billion in education benefits paid to over 25 million beneficiaries since 1944. Under the Post-9/11 GI Bill alone, VA has provided more than \$117.4 billion in benefits to over 2.3 million trainees since its inception in August of 2009. The provisions in P.L. 116-315 greatly assist VA in providing benefits more efficiently, effectively and are directly aligned with VA's transformational goals. These transformational goals include modernized VA technology; the highest standards of world-class customer service; improved oversight and accountability; expanded opportunities for Service members, Veterans and eligible family members in pursuit of their academic goals; enhancing the Nation's economic vitality with innovative programs; and enriching lives by giving beneficiaries the tools they need to further their education and achieve their career aspirations.

Public Law 116-315

On January 5, 2021, *the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020* was signed into law. This new law includes 32 provisions related to the administration of VA education benefits to improve or expand various GI Bill programs. Specifically, P.L. 116-315 expands the Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses Pilot Program to include transitioning Service members who are within 180 days of separation from the military and also increases the annual funding for the program from \$15 million to \$45 million; expands the Edith Nourse Rogers Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Scholarship program to allow scholarships for individuals enrolled in a dual post-secondary degree program and health care professionals completing clinical training. The law also expands eligibility for the Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry Scholarship to a child or spouse of a Service member who dies on or after September 11, 2001, in the line of duty while serving on other than active duty as a member of the Armed Forces or a child or spouse of a Selected Reserve member who dies on or after September 11, 2001, from a service-connected disability. Additionally,

the law contains new enrollment verification requirements; expands restoration of entitlement in some cases; sunsets the Montgomery GI Bill – Active Duty Program; substantially changes VA’s oversight of GI Bill-approved schools; and includes many other provisions.

VA has taken significant steps to implement the education-related provisions in P.L. 116-315 in a timely and efficient manner. Immediately after the law was enacted, the VA Education Service stood up an implementation team consisting of members of the VBA Senior Leadership and eight dedicated workstream leads to manage and coordinate all implementation tasks. The implementation team outlined critical tasks, focusing efforts on those provisions that became effective or applicable on the date of enactment or prior to August 1, 2021. The highest priority was given to those provisions with an information technology (IT) impact. VA has made great strides in the implementation of P.L. 116-315. More specifically, we have implemented 15 of the 32 education-related provisions and are on track to implement 27 of the 32 provisions by August 1, 2021. The five remaining provisions with effective or applicability dates beyond August 1, 2021, will be implemented thereafter.

Date of Enactment Provisions

VA has taken significant steps in the 6 months since the law was enacted to implement the 16 provisions that were effective or applicable immediately or prior to August 1, 2021. These provisions include improvements to the STEM Scholarship Program (Section 1001); an authorization for the transfer of benefits under the Post-9/11 GI Bill towards foster children (Section 1011); a requirement that financial responsibility be placed on schools and training programs, instead of students, for payments made directly to educational institutions (Section 1019); a requirement for the development of risk-based surveys (Section 1013(a)); and the continuation of educational assistance to those negatively impacted by the coronavirus emergency (Section 1102). VA has successfully implemented 15 of the 16 provisions. VA is working diligently to implement the remaining provision, section 1008, which clarifies eligibility for participation in the Yellow Ribbon Program. As a result of this clarification, foreign schools will be eligible to voluntarily participate in the Yellow Ribbon Program for the 2021-2022 academic year. To implement this section, VA has updated the instruction sheet for the Yellow Ribbon application; made updates to the “Frequently Asked Questions” (FAQ) resource and the Yellow Ribbon website; and started accepting applications from foreign schools wanting to participate in the Yellow Ribbon Program. Additionally, we are continuing to conduct further outreach and training activities.

August 1, 2021 and Beyond Provisions

VA is on track to implement the education-related provisions that either are effective or have applicability dates on or after August 1, 2021. VA has already fully implemented section 1016, which requires law schools to be accredited by a specialized accrediting agency to be approved for the GI Bill. The remaining provisions expand the Fry Scholarship to children and spouses of certain deceased members of the Armed Forces; mandate that schools charge in-state tuition and fees for additional beneficiaries

to remain approved for GI Bill benefits; make other expansions to benefits; and require VA to perform additional oversight duties. Thus far, VA has issued guidance to the Regional Processing Offices enabling them to begin issuing Certificates of Eligibility to individuals who were previously denied the Fry Scholarship, but now qualify based on section 1002. VA has also amended the work-study application to implement section 1006, which expands qualifying work-study activities to include outreach services provided through Congressional offices. VA provided messaging to Congressional offices to inform them of this new provision and, in early July 2021, conducted a training session with interested Congressional offices to further explain this provision and the application process.

Section 1010 requires students to electronically verify their continued enrollment in school with VA. If a student fails to certify for 2 consecutive months, VA will withhold monthly housing allowance payments until the student completes certification. VA's initial implementation strategy for this section consists of a limited IT solution that will be in place by August 1, 2021. VA will roll out a phased approach. The first phase will be limited to students enrolled in non-college degree programs; the second phase, which will include students enrolled in college degree programs, will be available by the end of calendar year 2021. Additionally, section 1015 requires accredited institutions to be approved to participate in the Federal Student Aid Program through Title IV of the Higher Education Act in order to be eligible to receive GI Bill funds. Section 1018 essentially codifies the requirements of Executive Order 13607, "Establishing the Principles of Excellence." VA communicated the requirements to schools and State approving agencies on several occasions and held an "Office Hours" training event for School Certifying Officials (SCO). Any school that is not compliant must request a waiver or be subject to the adverse action mandated in the statute (such as suspension of program approval, program disapproval or the publication of a caution flag on the GI Bill Comparison Tool). VA is currently reviewing waiver requests submitted in accordance with sections 1015 and 1018 of P.L. 116-315.

Communications

Throughout the implementation process of the education-related provisions of P.L. 116-315, VA has been committed to transparency and has used several means to disseminate information to both internal and external partners. The specific dissemination tools include briefings; the VA website; direct email campaigns; social media; and other communication channels. VA created the [Isakson and Roe Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 - Education and Training \(va.gov\)](https://www.va.gov/education/education-and-training-act-of-2020) webpage specifically for the Isakson and Roe legislation. The webpage provides extensive information on the public law and includes a breakdown of each provision; FAQs; easy-to-understand infographics; VA contact information; and an option for students to sign up for Gov Delivery, a subscription that allows VA to push out notifications about the impact of changes in law on GI Bill benefits. VA provided messaging to over 870,000 Education beneficiaries and to over 50,000 SCOs informing them of this new legislation. Since SCOs are a critical link between VA and its beneficiaries, VA has undertaken a major effort to ensure that SCOs are knowledgeable

about the impacts to students and their schools by holding “Office Hours” training events.

VA intends Office Hours to provide an interactive experience; an opportunity to ask questions or raise concerns; and an opportunity to provide timely updates to the SCO handbook. In addition, VA conducted an outreach campaign using email, social media and partnerships with other stakeholders to directly communicate with students about the change in the law that require schools and training programs (instead of the students) to be financially responsible for GI Bill payments paid directly to an educational institution.

VA is committed to ensuring that all provisions are implemented as promptly and efficiently as possible, and we will continue to maintain clear communication with all partners, especially our beneficiaries.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee today. I look forward to responding to any questions from you and Members of the Committee.