



STATEMENT OF
STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA

BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

HEARING ON THE TOPIC OF:
PENDING LEGISLATION

May 18, 2022

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, and Members of the Subcommittee: Thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit testimony on the legislation pending before you today.

With a mission focused on empowering student veterans, SVA is committed to providing an educational experience that goes beyond the classroom. Through a dedicated network of on-campus chapters, SVA aims to inspire yesterday's warriors by connecting student veterans with a community of like-minded chapter leaders. Every day these passionate leaders work to provide the necessary resources, network support, and advocacy to ensure student veterans can effectively connect, expand their skills, and ultimately achieve their greatest potential.

Draft bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for the approval of certain study-abroad programs for purposes of the educational assistance programs of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

This bill would address the recent changes to study abroad program eligibility by providing a generous on-ramp for these programs to continue operating while seeking VA approval. It also provides an avenue to maintain oversight and accountability for these programs during the on-ramp period by requiring higher education institutions to assume responsibility for the programming offered.

SVA supports this bill, but we would like to provide a suggestion for improvement.

In August 2020, VA enacted a revised interpretation of 38 U.S.C. § 3680A(f), the statute underlying the approvals of study abroad programs for student veterans. These new requirements restricted student veterans' ability to attend some of the most common and popular study abroad programs available.¹ In response to these changes, SVA and NAFSA: Association of International Educators wrote a letter to Secretary McDonough asking him to reconsider these administrative changes because of the obstacles they created for student veterans pursuing study abroad.² VA's response to our letter made clear that the agency believes its revised interpretation is strictly compliant with the underlying statute and they have no room to provide relief to the affected students.³

While we understand VA's position as appropriate to the letter of the law, we believe this change creates unnecessary obstacles to an increasingly necessary component of many higher education programs. Further, it creates inequity between the treatment of student veterans and Title IV students as it relates to study abroad opportunities. SVA believes that student veterans should have the same opportunity to study abroad and develop the skillset they need to enter a global workforce as the Department of Education (ED) provides their Title IV classmates.

We would like to highlight one area of concern in this otherwise excellent draft bill: third-party providers remain ineligible for approval for study abroad programs entirely. Third-party providers are popular and often invaluable facilitators for excellent study abroad programs and are excluded from seeking approval from VA. It also creates issues for programs that fill multiple roles in the study abroad process, such as Butler's Institute for Study Abroad (IFSA), which is part of a GI Bill-approved institution but also acts as a third-party facilitator for other institutions.⁴

¹ Institute of International Education (IIE), "Duration of Study Abroad," Open Doors Report 2020 (New York: IIE, 2020), <https://opendoorsdata.org/data/us-study-abroad/duration-of-study-abroad>.

² Letter to the Honorable Denis R. McDonough, Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs. <<https://www.nafsa.org/sites/default/files/media/document/nafsa-sva-042021.pdf>>.

³ Letter to NAFSA, SVA from Thomas J. Murphy, Acting Under Secretary for Benefits. <<https://www.nafsa.org/sites/default/files/media/document/va-nafsa-061521.pdf>>.

⁴ Institute for Study Abroad. About Us. <https://ifsa-butler.org/who-we-are/>.

Complicating the matter is that current prohibitions include payment processing locations established by approved domestic institutions but that are located away from the approved campus location, which is common among the University of California and California State University systems. In other words, if a domestic school establishes a payment processing office off-site, VA will not make payments to that entity, regardless of the school's approval status. Irrespective of whether this issue can be resolved here, we would be remiss not to flag this exception as an ongoing concern and reiterate our desire to work with the Committee on a solution that brings parity to student veterans and their peers.

We understand these concerns raise more extensive conversations around how VA interacts with third-party providers. However, we believe study abroad programs present a unique opportunity to help reduce friction between higher education norms and GI Bill administration. We look forward to continued conversations on this issue.

Draft bill to expand and improve the Department of Veterans Affairs Covid-19 veteran rapid retraining assistance program and high technology pilot program, and for other purposes.

This draft bill would make several changes to the Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program (VRRAP) and high technology pilot program (VET TEC), including doubling the duration of VRRAP assistance, eliminating the age limits, easing eligibility requirements for those with minor amounts of VA educational assistance remaining, allowing programs that lead to a degree, and will enable institutions of higher learning to provide VET TEC training.

SVA supports this bill.

This draft bill makes several much-needed changes to VRRAP's underlying structure that we think will strengthen veteran and provider engagement in the program. VRRAP, on paper, provides a wonderful benefit to veterans looking to upskill or reskill in a rapidly changing economy. Still, several obstacles have kept it from achieving the same levels of success as similar programs. This draft addresses the reason for the majority of denials given to interested veterans and the difficulties potential providers have expressed in what training they can offer.

As we understand it, minor amounts of remaining educational assistance eligibility were the main reasons most applicants were denied. This has been a source of tremendous frustration to veterans, VA, and providers, and SVA is grateful to see the problem addressed here.

While all the changes in this draft bill are positive, the most significant change, in our view, is allowing VRRAP providers to offer training that leads to a degree. This, along with the extended benefit duration, gives the program a meaningful distinction from VET TEC and, with most VRRAP providers being universities and other educational institutions, greatly expands the available programming for participants while improving potential outcomes.

In addition, this draft bill makes a significant change to the VET TEC program. VET TEC has demonstrated remarkably strong outcomes since it was established, and we regularly hear positive anecdotes from student veterans about the program. This bill would allow institutions of higher learning to provide VET TEC training, giving student veterans a significantly larger variety of training providers to choose from and greater access to matriculation opportunities.

SVA is fully supportive of this change and looks forward to the program's continued success.

Draft bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to establish in the Department of Veterans Affairs an Office of Food Insecurity, and for other purposes.

This draft bill would establish an Office of Food Insecurity at VA and establish a pilot program for disbursing grants to eligible entities to establish partnerships that address food insecurity among veterans.

SVA supports this bill.

Food insecurity is an issue Chapters hear about from student veterans on a regular basis, which always seems to surprise those who think the GI Bill pays for everything a student veteran needs to attend school. The reality is that many students experience food insecurity, among other basic needs concerns, but the issue we face in addressing the problem is a lack of robust data. While we have anecdotal evidence, hard data is sparse and difficult to locate. Establishing this office brings attention and accountability to the issue of food insecurity as it relates to all veterans, and the pilot grant program promises to expand VA's outreach and connection to the community and those partners working to provide meaningful solutions. As eligible entities for these grants include institutions of higher learning, it is our sincere hope that many schools participate in the program and provide robust data on their programs and impact, as well.

In addition, we look forward to the annual report this draft bill requires, as it will be helpful in establishing a reliable, ongoing baseline of food insecurity among veterans and deepen our understanding of how best to address veterans' food insecurity challenges.

In addition to the draft bills above, SVA also supports the draft bill to provide for the eligibility for educational assistance under the Department of Veterans Affairs Post-9/11 Educational Assistance Program for certain individuals who receive sole survivorship discharges.

o

The continued success of veterans in higher education in the Post-9/11 era is no mistake or coincidence. In our Nation's history, educated veterans have always been the best of a generation and the key to solving our most complex challenges. This is the legacy we know today's student veterans carry.

We thank the Chairman, Ranking Member, and the Subcommittee Members for your time, attention, and devotion to the cause of veterans in higher education.