

STATEMENT OF
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FOR THE RECORD

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

WITH RESPECT TO

“Pending Legislation”

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Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, 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 provide our remarks on legislation pending before this subcommittee.

H.R. 3950, Veterans Medical Legal Partnerships Act of 2021

The VFW supports this legislation, which would authorize the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to establish and maintain medical legal partnerships to provide no-cost legal services at VA facilities, to screen veterans for civil legal matters associated with their health care or other benefits provided by the Department, and to facilitate the provision of no-cost legal services at Department facilities. The VFW believes on-site availability of these services for veterans at VA health care facilities would actively promote rehabilitation and reduce recidivism.

H.R. 6124, Veterans Affairs Home Loan Guaranty Resiliency and Concurrency Enhancement (GRACE) Act of 2021

The VFW supports the intent of this bill. However, we do not believe extending loan fee rates for veteran homebuyers is the best path forward for this proposal.

Discussion Draft, A.N.S. to the Tiny Homes for Homeless Veterans Act

The VFW supports this amendment in the nature of a substitute to H.R. 6307, which would establish a pilot program to distribute Grant and Per Diem (GPD) Program funds to eligible entities to create tiny home villages for veterans experiencing homelessness. This bill would give

veterans the opportunity for independence, while also offering a sense of community and the availability of resources and services.

Veterans Community Project (VCP), which is a non-profit organization founded and led by VFW members, created transitional housing for homeless veterans through a community of fifty tiny homes around Kansas City, Missouri. VCP Village has served as an important example of the ability for a tiny home model to combat homelessness and simultaneously offer wrap-around services. The community offers counseling, legal assistance, yoga classes for post-traumatic stress disorder, cooking classes, job search assistance and other recreational activities. The VFW believes future pilot programs based on models such as VCP can help bridge gaps in care and security for veterans experiencing homelessness.

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

The VFW supports this proposal, which would establish a new Office of Food Insecurity within VA, staffed with an appointed director to oversee outreach to veterans on food assistance programs, inter- and intra-departmental collaboration to develop new resources, training for resource providers, and guidance for administering programs. This proposal would allow the Office of Food Insecurity to pilot a program to create grant-based partnerships with existing community resource providers, giving this office quicker ability to reach eligible veterans in need and connect them with food assistance programs managed outside of VA. We know that although veterans are more likely to face food insecurity, they are also less likely to enroll in food assistance programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), even when eligible. As SNAP is administered through the U.S. Department of Agriculture, we believe this proposal would make great strides to aide interoperability and communication between departments and drive meaningful change.

We also support language that would require VA to provide an annual report on veteran food insecurity. As this issue is a strong upstream risk factor to veteran suicide, we would urge this data to also be used when compiling VA's annual suicide report, as well as all data available on veterans using the Veterans Benefits Administration.

Discussion Draft, to amend Title 38, United States Code, to extend certain Department of Veterans Affairs programs for homeless veterans

The VFW supports this proposal, which would extend the pending expirations of the Advisory Committee on Homeless Veterans, the annual five-million-dollar allocation to grant programs for homeless veterans with special needs, and the flexibilities for VA to expand and improve homelessness programs. Each of these temporary expansions for VA programming and authority to combat homelessness have now proven essential. Short of defeating homelessness for veterans, we cannot allow these programs to sunset.

Discussion Draft, to amend Title 38, United States Code, to expand eligibility for, and extend authorization of, certain programs for homeless veterans

The VFW supports this bill, which would ensure VA continues to have authority to conduct outreach and provide care, treatment, rehabilitation services, and transitional housing for veterans experiencing serious mental illness and homelessness. In light of President Biden’s report, “Reducing Military and Veteran Suicide: Advancing a Comprehensive, Cross-Sector, Evidence-Informed Approach,” we need to continue to protect veterans with socio-economic and mental health risks for suicide. Ending these authorities within the year is unacceptable, and we must continue to allow VA to combat veteran homelessness with as many tools as possible.

Discussion Draft, to amend Title 38, United States Code, to extend authority for supportive services for very low-income veteran families in permanent housing

The VFW supports this proposal, which would extend and increase funding for the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program through 2023 and 2024. This is critical financial and resource assistance needed by the veteran families that find themselves battling inflation, housing and child care shortages. Congress must quickly approve long-term funding to ensure the continuity of SSVF availability and make sure this funding is sufficient to support the growing number of veteran families in need.

Discussion Draft, to amend Title 38, United States Code, to extend Department of Veterans Affairs assistance for individuals residing temporarily in housing owned by a family member

The VFW supports this bill, which would extend the expiration date for the housing adaptation assistance available for disabled veterans temporarily residing with a family member. Given the nature of the current economy and housing market, these protections are needed to keep these disabled veterans safe and comfortable if they are unable to move to a permanent home due to housing shortages and rapidly rising home costs.

Discussion Draft, Emergency Relief for Servicemembers Act

The VFW supports this proposal, which would ensure dependents of service members are afforded consumer protections and would safeguard service members who cannot use services under a new consumer contract when they are unable to act on their military orders due to emergency circumstances. Additionally, this proposal would expand the definition of consumer services and give service members and their dependents the ability to cancel gym memberships and home security services when executing their orders. The financial security of military dependents is synonymous with the financial security of service members, and protections that fall short of including spouses and dependents fall short of protecting service members. This proposal would fix that shortcoming for consumer contracts. In the wake of massive stop movements during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical that protections for service members are in place before the next crisis transpires. This proposal would ensure service members who prepare for their moves in advance by entering into new consumer contracts are not put in financial jeopardy if faced with delays in their military moves.

Discussion Draft, Building Credit Access for Veterans Act of 2022

The VFW supports this bill, which would require VA to create a pilot program to establish alternative credit scoring for veterans and service members. Many veterans join the military at a young age and spend a considerable part of early adulthood living on military installations in assigned housing close to their commands, with many basic needs covered such as food, health care, and education. Veterans often transition from active duty service with insufficient credit history compared to their civilian counterparts. This may make it difficult when seeking loans, despite veterans' financial stability and record of making responsible payments for other services not tracked through traditional credit scoring. We support a pilot program that would examine the potential for other indicators such as rent, utility, and insurance payments to give these veterans the credit histories they need for economic upward mobility once they transition.

Discussion Draft, to expand and improve the Department of Veterans Affairs COVID-19 veteran rapid retraining assistance programs and high technology pilot programs, and for other purposes

The VFW supports the intent of this bill, which would expand eligibility for both veterans and education providers participating in rapid retraining programs. We also strongly support opening eligibility for institutions of higher education for Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) to maximize the number of providers available. Despite strong veteran interest, VET TEC is available in only fourteen states and with limited providers in those states. Many traditional institutions are now offering expanded curriculums with bootcamp-style, short-term credentialing and training in technology fields. Allowing these institutions to offer programs not yet approved for GI Bill funds would be of great service to veterans and would make it possible for more veterans to participate.

The VFW supports several of the expansions in this proposal, including eliminating age restrictions tied to the Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program (VRRAP) and expanding eligibility to twenty-four months to allow veterans currently enrolled in two-year programs to complete their degrees. As the current list of VRRAP providers includes many two-year, associate degree programs, it is imperative veterans currently enrolled through VRRAP are able to reach graduation and not be put in a precarious position once their benefit reaches the current twelve-month limit. We believe the intent of this program is to provide training rapidly, so unemployed veterans are able to bring new skills into the workforce and quickly regain employment security. We do not support expanding to bachelor's and graduate degrees short of gaining an understanding that the time commitment veterans put into the program would provide the employment outcomes they are seeking.

We are eager to see more data from VA regarding the outcomes of those who have received a VRRAP certificate or degree. We believe these outcomes will give important insight into the best investments for future rapid retraining and education benefit expansion. We urge Congress to request in-depth reporting from VA on the nature of the programs veterans selected through VRRAP and the types of programs resulting in employment, and any overlap these programs might have with those offered through VET TEC.

Discussion Draft, Empowering Veterans Against Cyberthreats Act of 2022

The VFW supports the intent of this legislation, which would require VA to create cyber-hygiene training. The VFW is dedicated to combating false, predatory narratives by continuously pushing truthful and accurate information to veterans. We believe the strongest means to combat destructive actors is to provide overwhelming truths, so we urge VA to combat cyber threats to veterans by ensuring accurate messaging that is shared widely and loudly.

H.R. 2650, Military Spouse Licensing Relief Act of 2021

The VFW supports this bill, which would give flexibilities to military spouses relying on licenses and credentials to maintain steady employment throughout frequent military moves. Military spouses historically face significantly higher unemployment and underemployment compared to the general population. In the current economy, many military families rely on a two-income family just to put food on the table. This bill would make important headway toward steady military spouse employment for those who have spent time, money, and energy on well-earned credentials and licensures.

H.R. 4702, Military Spouse Tax Act

The VFW supports this bill, which would extend existing protections for military spouse residency claims for the purposes of taxation. The military lifestyle requires both service members and military spouses to be exceedingly flexible, and it is important that policies also be flexible to support military families whenever possible. As awareness increases around military spouse employment and as remote work availability increases following the COVID-19 pandemic, military spouses are able to more easily find portable jobs as they move from state to state in support of the service members' orders. Alternatively, some military spouses choose to stay in one location to continue their career and may reside in a different state than the service member. This proposal would allow military families to have greater flexibility in both instances and allow for consistency in family finances with a steady tax rate.

Discussion Draft, Improving the VA Home Loan Benefit Act of 2022

The VFW supports this proposal, which would seek insight to improve the appraisal process for VA-guaranteed home loans and incorporates the VFW's recommendations put forth in the December 2021 "Removing Barriers to Veteran Homeownership" subcommittee hearing. Veterans continue to report their inability to be competitive in today's housing market while using VA-guaranteed home loans as they battle against cash offers and conventional loans promising quick closes and multiple concessions. We strongly support measures requiring VA to evaluate their appraisal process and minimum property requirements to best streamline the experience, cut away red tape, and maintain the integrity of the program. It is important to entice appraisers to become certified to work through the VA Home Loan program to maximize availability and ensure the time to close on a home through VA-guaranteed loans remains comparable to conventional loans.

Discussion Draft, to amend Title 38, United States Code, to provide for the eligibility of educational assistance under the Department of Veterans Affairs Post 9/11 Educational Assistance Program of certain individuals who receive sole survivorship discharges, and for other purposes

The VFW supports this bill, which would extend eligibility for the Post-9/11 GI Bill to individuals with sole survivorship discharges.

Discussion Draft, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to seek to enter into an agreement with an entity to carry out a pilot program under which such entity shall connect homeless veterans to a network of supportive services, and for other purposes

The VFW supports this proposal, which would create three geographically diverse pilot programs providing networks of supportive services for homeless veterans. Although there are multitudes of local and national resources available, veterans often simply “don’t know what they don’t know.” The ability to tap into the community ecosystem of interconnected resources can be significant in holistically addressing a veteran’s needs. If a veteran connects with one resource—whether it is food assistance, housing, mental health care, job assistance, or some other—and is then referred to or receives outreach from a separate resource the veteran also needs, the likelihood of receiving full support would be drastically increased.

Discussion Draft, 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

The VFW supports this proposal, which would remove limitations student veterans face when seeking to pursue study-abroad courses operated through an entity contracted by their VA-approved educational institution. We support language in this proposal that would put the onus on the institution, not VA, to make certain accommodations such as certifying courses and accepting responsibility for the quality of the education.

The VFW recommends that Congress continues to query VA regarding direct payments to foreign institutions, and what necessary upgrades or policy changes are needed for this to be feasible. There may still be challenges for students using VA education benefits when the foreign institution administering the study-abroad course typically collects the tuition directly. Updating VA systems to support payments to foreign banks would help students studying abroad, students attending foreign institutions, and broadly all veterans living overseas and collecting VA compensation or benefits.

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, this concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer 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 2022, 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.