TESTIMONY OF

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

WITH RESPECT TO THE VET TEC AUTHORIZATION ACT OF 2023

MARCH 30, 2023

Good morning Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin and Members of the Committee. Thank you for inviting me here to discuss the VET TEC Authorization Act of 2023.

While I will focus my statement on VET TEC, please allow me to offer the following support on the additional legislation being introduced:

HR 728: Short Term Fellowship Pilot Program	Support
H.R. 1169, To amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide certificates of eligibility and award letters to certain individuals using electronic means	Support
HR 291: Vaccine Discharge Parity Act	Support
HR 645: Healthy Foundations for Homeless Veterans Act	Support
H.R. 746, Streamlining Aviation for Eligible Veterans Act	Support
H.R. XXXX, To amend title 38, United States Code, to provide that educational assistance paid under Department of Veterans Affairs educational assistance programs to an individual who pursued a program or course of education that was suspended or terminated by reason of a determination of fraud shall not be charged against the entitlement of the individual, and for other purpose	Support
H.R. XXXX, To amend title 38, United States Code, to render an individual who transfers certain educational assistance, to which the individual is entitled because	Support

of an agreement by such individual to serve in the Armed Forces, to a dependent of that individual, and who fails to complete such agreement, solely liable for the overpayment of such educational assistance, and for other purposes	
H.R. XXXX, the Filipino Education Fairness Act;	Support
H.R. XXXX, Get Rewarding Outdoor Work for our Veterans Act;	Support
H.R. XXXX, To amend title 38,United States Code, to expand eligibility for a certain program of job counseling, training, and placement service for veterans	Support

Introduction

My name is Alicia Boddy, and I am the Chief Development and Operations Officer for Code Platoon. I also serve as our School Certifying Official. That is, I complete all of the electronic filings to the VA and am the point of contact for both the VA and students.

Code Platoon is a nonprofit coding bootcamp with a mission to train the Military Community (Veterans, transitioning Active Duty, and Military Spouses) to become professional software developers. Coding bootcamps, or code schools, refer to a training model whereby students are taught in-demand high technology skills, often in an intense and typically condensed time frame. Most coding bootcamps gear their programs towards high placement rates (70%+) in well-paying technical jobs. Code Platoon hosts in-person classes in Chicago, as well as remote learning. We have trained over 360 students since our first class in 2016, including 168 VET TEC students. Code Platoon is approved to accept the GI Bill and Veteran Readiness & Employment benefits. We were one of the first three providers approved to accept VET TEC in April of 2019 and have maintained our approval throughout the pilot program.

I am here in support of the VET TEC Authorization Act of 2023. VET TEC has been successful because Veterans, the VA, and providers have all worked together towards a common mission. This collaboration will be vital as VET TEC becomes a permanent education benefit, often referred to as "Forever VET TEC" among providers. I will share the experience Code Platoon and other providers have had with VET TEC and where there are opportunities for improvement based on lessons learned during this pilot phase. More importantly, I will share stories from VET TEC graduates whose lives and careers have been positively impacted over the last 5 years.

Veterans

At the heart of VET TEC our the Veterans. This program is a lifeline for non-traditional learners eager to find a career in high technology roles. During the pandemic, when all schools were

forced to move their training online, VET TEC providers were prepared to serve the increase of Veterans interested in our training programs. Enrollment spiked across programs, in large part because VET TEC allowed Veterans to train remotely without sacrificing any learning. During the pilot program, providers served approximately 5,000 Veterans each year. Thank you to the committee for including up to 8,000 Veterans each year in the permanent version of this program. VET TEC providers continued to see high job placement outcomes during the pandemic and successfully found careers for thousands of Veterans in high demand roles.

Travis Bright, 2021 Hack Reactor graduate, is honored to share his story with the committee:

I joined the Air Force in 2013 and continued my educational pursuits via tuition assistance. During this time, I completed an associates degree from the community college of the Air Force. In 2017, I was honorably discharged after fulfilling my service commitment and began studying at the University of Washington. In 2019, I graduated with my undergraduate degree, a step towards my ultimate goal of a Masters degree.

I live in Seattle, Washington, where to start a family, buy a house, and be an active member in our community is very expensive. After graduating with my Bachelor's degree, I took a position working 40 hours per week making $18 per hour, which put my annual income just shy of $37,500. Many jobs in Seattle require a minimum of a Bachelor's degree, yet commonly pay less than $20 per hour.

In March 2020, I was violently assaulted by a random stranger. My jaw was completely fractured in two places. I couldn't eat solid food, I was actively trying to convince myself that it had just been dislocated and sprained because the thought of missing hours of work and losing what little income I had was a luxury I couldn't afford. After a week of pain that was not getting any better, I took half a day off, went to the ER and was told I needed surgery immediately. The day following my surgery, with my jaw wired shut, I returned to my very physically intensive job because I had no other choice. Rent for my 1 bedroom, 600 square foot apartment was $1300 a month, I had a $350 car payment, insurance, etc. I was financially struggling as I tried to focus on my ultimate goal of getting a Masters degree. I wanted to find a career that could provide me with the future that I volunteered to protect for all Americans.

In June of 2020, I found a path towards financial independence which didn't require years of expensive graduate school. The path that I found was through VET TEC.

I applied to VET TEC, was approved, and selected a program on the VA's preferred providers list. The specific program I had selected would not charge tuition if I did not find meaningful employment within 6 months, so it seemed relatively low risk for the VA. I began the preparatory courses required to begin the program while continuing to work my full time job.

In October of 2020 I began my full time software engineering program. The program lasted three months, and it was hard. Every day was a challenge, but I had great support from my peers and the faculty. They taught me the fundamentals of software engineering, team collaboration from a software engineering perspective, how to develop a successful interview strategy, tailor my resume, and build my professional network.

I finished the program in January of 2021 and received a job offer a month later. The offer had a base salary of $110,000 and a total compensation of around $130,000. Almost a year later, I received an offer from another company with a base salary of $170,000 and a total compensation of $200,000-$225,000. $225,000 is exactly 6 times more than I was making before I became a software engineer. I make six times more than I previously did, with only one year of experience. I am a team lead at a company that makes $350 million a year in revenue. I have overseen the entire frontend development process at my company, I mentor junior engineers, and my fellow Veterans who are going through software engineering programs. Now, not only can I afford to take time off for medical emergencies, I can take vacations, I can afford to have a family.

It is my firm belief VET TEC should be made permanent, as I'm just one example of how life altering this program is. VET TEC actually needs to be expanded upon. Most of the programs have job search programs, which require full time student attendance and have certain criteria for students to continue in the job search program. It's actually very similar to the unemployment process, you need to apply to a certain number of jobs per week, expand your Linkedin network and gain referrals to positions, continue studying and work on projects, etc. For VET TEC to set more Veterans up for success, the housing benefits need to be expanded while students are enrolled in this job search process. Many Veterans are living on a month to month income, and if it takes three or four months to find a job, that is something many Veterans can't afford to do.

If I had gone through this program directly after separating from the Air Force, I would have been 3 and a half years further along in my career and nearly a million dollars more wealthy.

Additionally, it would have saved the VA a lot of money on my educational expenses by utilizing the GI Bill.

Thank you for your time and consideration, and I implore you to make VET TEC a permanent program and to continue investing in our veterans alternative education paths.

Below are a few more highlights from VET TEC graduates. Additional impact stories will be provided to the committee by request.

> *"VET TEC definitely was a great option for me because I could not do Code Platoon in-person and the GI Bill was not available for remote students. Their enrollment team helped guide me and I ended up getting approved for VET TEC and accepted into Code Platoon. Today, I am an associate engineer with Chicago Trading Company making $125,000 per year. I would not be here without VET TEC and Code Platoon."*

> *"My journey into professional software development started a year before my class at Code Platoon. As I was transitioning from an Active Duty service member into a Navy Veteran, I came across the VET TEC program on the Veterans Affairs Education website. The goal is to match Veterans with a leading training provider to help develop those high-tech skills to quickly be placed in a high-paying tech job. I found Code Platoon and started the application process."*

> *"I attended Code Platoon remotely from February to May 2021. Though my entire experience was remote, it did not detract from the immersive experience and overall quality education. In just a few short months, myself and others, all of whom were at different levels of experience, were able to go from writing simple "Hello World" scripts, to full-stack applications incorporating multiple 3rd party APIs. Overall, I can't recommend this program enough to any Veteran!"*

VA Education Services

In the summer of 2019, I formed the VET TEC Working Group (VTWG). What started out as a call among 3-5 providers is now a standing monthly call with the majority of the 27 currently approved VET TEC providers attending. We are frequently joined by the VA's VET TEC approvals and processing teams, who make it a priority to join these calls and provide updates to providers. This relationship between providers and the VA has been vital to the overall success of VET TEC. By creating consistent and open lines of communication between providers and the teams in Buffalo and Washington D.C., we are often able to address problems quickly and help Veterans use the VET TEC program efficiently and effectively.

The first topic of discussion each month always revolves around the VET TEC budget. VET TEC was originally allotted $15 million per fiscal year for the 5 year pilot. In FY 2021, this October 1 funding ran out November 5. Congress increased funding to $45 million per fiscal year after this occurred, even at one point adding funding to bring the budget to $125 million. Even with the larger budgets, the VET TEC program consistently exhausts our funding prior to the end of the fiscal year, leaving thousands of Veterans unable to participate in our training programs.

This is a reality we are facing right now. Low funds letters are being sent by the VA to approved Veterans, indicating that funding may exhaust in the coming weeks. **As a short term solution, please consider adding $60 million to the VET TEC budget immediately. This will ensure the VET TEC pilot program can continue through FY '23 as we finalize this permanent version.**

The VTWG works collaboratively with the VA to troubleshoot issues as they arise. One of the requirements of VET TEC is for both Veterans and providers to complete a Meaningful Employment form. This form includes detailed information about the job that the Veteran has secured because of their training from the provider. As Meaningful Employment forms were submitted, the VA processing team was spending a great deal of time manually deciphering the job descriptions and relating them to the provider's curriculum. Many forms were initially returned for edits, causing delays in tuition payments to providers. Frustration was brewing among Veterans, the VA and providers. During a VTWG call, we were able to have an open discussion about these edit requests and delays. As a collaborative effort, we agreed on common job descriptions and titles. Meaningful employment processing became much easier and efficient, allowing providers to focus their efforts on placing students in jobs.

During the recent transition from VA-Once to Enrollment Manager, the VTWG and VA were able to develop solutions as SCOs began to utilize this new system. One particular issue common for VET TEC providers, certifying terms less than 43 days, was brought to the VA's attention right away. The VA submitted a ticket to the data migration team and the issue will be resolved quickly. VA also quickly updated our VET TEC SCO handbook, with input from the VTWG, to include best practices for Enrollment Manager. This has helped VET TEC providers more efficiently adopt Enrollment Manager and continue our mission to serve Veteran students.

A provider noted that these calls ``are the best training we receive each month.''

I want to especially thank Sarahbeth Dean, Peter Nastasi, and Bill Spruce for their tireless efforts in working with the VTWG over these last 5 years.

PROVIDERS

VET TEC providers are dedicated to training Veterans and providing career services support as our graduates begin their careers in high technology. During the course of the pilot program, providers have relied on the VTWG to crowdsource ideas to improve their services in support of their Veteran students. It has been inspiring to share in the exchange of best practices and opportunities for improvement among our training programs. One school noted,

> *"We are a better training provider because of our participation in the VET TEC pilot program and the VET TEC Working Group. The capabilities we have built include our Student Success Team, Career Services Center, and Employment Partner Network, will continue to assist Veterans for years to come."*

The VET TEC Authorization Act of 2023 expands provider approvals, including Institutes of Higher Learning. VET TEC has been an incredibly successful program because of the dedication and collaboration of providers with the VA and each other. The VTWG should be included in permanent legislation as a formal partner to the VA and new providers encouraged to join. As more providers onboard, it will be critical to continue these collaborative efforts through the VTWG, providing real time assistance and maintaining a collective focus on high job placement outcomes. The VTWG will be instrumental in continuing the positive momentum from the pilot program and will help the VA remain cutting edge in their support of high technology training programs.

Job placement has been a key metric for the VET TEC pilot program and is included in the VET TEC Authorization Act of 2023. The VTWG discussed calculation of this metric with the GAO, based on their feedback from their October 2022 report. The VTWG looks forward to working closely with VA to establish a proper and consistent measurement of job placement outcomes across VET TEC providers.

During the pilot program, the VA withheld 50% of the tuition payment until the student found meaningful employment, which was required within 180 days of graduation. Providers have worked diligently over the last 5 years to track and support Veterans through the 180 days of job search. This is often complicated by the fact that Veterans do not face any repercussions for not communicating with the school and keeping them updated on their job search and/or filling out the Meaningful Employment form. While providers are grateful for the expansion of a payable outcome to include continuing education and the inclusion of charging other entitlement as available, we remain committed to our graduates finding meaningful employment as quickly as possible. This will require a commitment from both providers and Veterans to achieve positive outcomes around meaningful employment.

The VTWG collected feedback from providers regarding students not meeting the Meaningful Employment requirements. Many providers reported tuition losses over $250,000 each because Veterans did not participate in their career services programs and did not find Meaningful Employment within the 180 days required. This feedback is available to the committee on request.

Based on our experiences during the pilot program, **providers are requesting a more equitable payment structure of 50/25/25 to be included in the VET TEC Authorization Act of 2023.** Providers spend much of our resources recruiting students into our programs and training them for high demand technology careers. This updated payment structure is more reflective of the positive relationship between providers and the VA and will encourage more providers to continue participating in the VET TEC program.

The proposed permanent legislation has also updated the Meaningful Employment requirement to withhold the final 50% tuition payment (adjusted to 25% with the proposed new payment structure) until 'a covered individual has completed 180 days of employment'.

This will create an untenable barrier for providers, further exacerbating the struggles we face in tracking our graduates during their job seeking process. It has been incredibly challenging to establish processes that enable communication between graduates and providers in order to complete the ME form when an offer is received. It will be nearly impossible to continue communications with graduates through the first six months of their employment. As one provider says,

> *"With regards to getting a job, we are a training program. We provide training and support. Graduates ultimately control their own personal outcomes. Providers should not be penalized when a VET TEC graduate decides to extend their job search outside of 180 days, finds a job outside of their field of study, or any other myriad of reasons life may throw at them."*

Forever VET TEC

By passing the VET TEC Authorization Act of 2023, you have the opportunity to meet Veterans where they are in finding meaningful employment in high-demand jobs. Many of our students have used the majority of their GI Bill but do not have a career. Programs like VET TEC are an important signal from the VA that you want to help. This is particularly important as we rebuild our economy post-pandemic and recognize the increasing demand for a high technology workforce.

VET TEC is an innovative tool to change the narrative on VA Education Benefits. We can use these programs to focus on building the modern economy by filling high demand tech jobs through coding bootcamps and other short term or accelerated learning programs. This model of learning is the military model and approach that we know can work.

The payment structure to providers should be adjusted to 50/25/25. Training providers expend an incredible amount of resources recruiting and training students into our programs. By receiving 75% of tuition by graduation, providers would have more stability. Code schools in particular would continue to benefit with this streamlined payment structure, as we will always strive to place graduates in meaningful employment upon graduation.

The job placement metric and reporting should absolutely remain in place. Ideally, this data would be reported on the VA's GI Bill Comparison Tool or another VA website.

These suggested updates would ensure that VET TEC remains successful as permanent part of VA Education Benefits, providers who are committed to the mission of VET TEC are rewarded with timely approvals & payments and most importantly, Veterans are able to participate in a program that is fully funded for the entire fiscal year and can help them find meaningful employment in high demand, high technology roles.

VET TEC is an important training opportunity to support the evolving landscape of reskilling and upskilling. Veterans, the VA, and VET TEC providers are grateful to have this program supporting our collective efforts to positively impact the technology landscape in America.

<u>Conclusion</u>

Thank you for the opportunity to share my experience with VET TEC. I have seen first hand the impact these programs are having on our Veterans. One Code Platoon graduate recently shared,

> *"If you teach a Veteran to code they can support themselves and their families for a lifetime. Code Platoon, through their training program, is re-mobilizing Veteranas with a sense of purpose and you can't put a price tag on that."*

I look forward to working with you and the VA through the VET TEC Authorization Act of 2023, creating "Forever VET TEC" and enabling more Veterans to transition to high-demand jobs.

For questions about this testimony, you may contact me at 312-560-3003 or alicia@codeplatoon.org. This concludes my testimony, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.