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VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the transitioning Service members' experience with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the services and benefits available to them. Accompanying me today is Melissa Cohen, Executive Director, Outreach, Transition, and Economic Development, and Nick Pamperin, Executive Director, Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) Service. I want to express my appreciation for your continued support of the Nation's Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors. Within VA, our focus is on increasing transparency, improving collaboration, and keeping Veterans at the center of everything we do.

Transition Support

Transition Assistance Program

Established in 1991, the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is an interagency effort designed to help more than 200,000 transitioning Service members annually. Through TAP, VA partners with the Departments of Defense (DoD), Education, Homeland Security, and Labor, the Small Business Administration, and the Office of Personnel Management. Together, we help to equip Service members with the tools they need to succeed in civilian life and connect them to the benefits and services they have earned and deserve. In partnership, we take a comprehensive approach to care, ensuring that TAP is a tailored program that evolves with the changing needs of the transitioning Service members.

As part of TAP, VA works to inform transitioning Service members of the education and training benefits available to them. Specifically for the VR&E benefit, Module 4 (titled "Getting Career Ready"), presented during the mandatory VA Benefits and Services course, provides a comprehensive overview of VR&E and education benefits, and discusses how to apply for VR&E services online, by mail, and in person.

Further, the VA Education Benefits Military Life Cycle (MLC) module enables VA to connect with Service members well before transition so they can gain an early understanding of their benefits and plan for their futures. This module also overviews

VA education benefits and the VR&E Program. The Online Resource Guide provides VA.gov links to apply for VR&E directly.

VA Benefits and Services course and the VA Education Benefits MLC Module also provide information about the GI Bill Comparison Tool. This tool enables Service members to research approved schools and employers. Moreover, during the VA Benefits and Services course, Benefits Advisors discuss the importance of using the GI Bill Comparison Tool to locate institutions that accept the GI Bill, compare the benefits of chosen institutions, and learn which Veterans programs are available at their selected institutions.

During DoD Capstone, a mandatory component of the TAP process, a commander or commander's designee verifies that the transitioning Service member has met TAP Career Readiness Standards, has a viable Individual Transition Plan (ITP), and is prepared to transition to civilian life. During this process, Benefits Advisors are available to support individual Service members who have questions or need assistance with VA education benefits. Benefits Advisors assist with connecting Service members with VA's Personalized Career and Planning Guidance (PCPG) Program and VR&E, and with researching available Veteran programs on the campus the member plans to attend.

VA TAP also provides one-on-one sessions with a Benefits Advisor, offering Service members individualized assistance. One-on-one assistance sessions are based on the individual's needs and are driven by the information covered during the VA Benefits and Services course. The typical discussion topics include housing insecurity, education benefits, and disability compensation. In fiscal year (FY) 2023, VA conducted more than 53,000 one-on-one sessions, with more than 43% (22,800+ Service members) of those sessions including discussions on education and training program benefits. More than 14% (7,400+ Service members) of these sessions also discussed VR&E services.

VA Solid Start

The VA Solid Start (VASS) Program launched on December 2, 2019, as part of the Military to Civilian Readiness Pathway, to make early, consistent, and caring contact with newly separated Veterans. With the signing of VASS law (P.L. 117-205) on October 17, 2022, VA is permanently authorized to expand VASS with DoD coordination. VASS calls all eligible Veterans at three key stages (90-, 180-, and 365 days post-separation) during their first year after separation from active duty. Using data provided by DoD, VASS provides priority contact to Veterans, meeting certain mental health risk factors, supporting continuity of care, and lowering any barriers to access to mental health care treatment and support through VA. VASS representatives address challenges the Veteran may be facing at the time of the call by connecting the Veteran with the appropriate benefits or resources for assistance. These representatives receive special training to recognize the signs of crisis and, when needed, can provide a direct transfer to the Veterans Crisis Line for additional support.

VASS agents have the necessary access, information, and training to support to recently separated Service members with VR&E-related issues and concerns. When appropriate, based on the Veteran's specific situation at the time of the VASS engagement, VASS agents will discuss the possible availability of VR&E benefits to assist with the issue or concern raised by the Veteran. In calendar year (CY) 2023, VASS provided information on VR&E over 62,500 times.

From the program launch in December 2019 through July 2024, VASS has successfully connected with 501,640 (73.7%) recently separated Veterans, helping them connect with the benefits and services they have earned. For example, in CY 2023, of Veterans who had a successful VASS connection, 1.13% applied for VR&E benefits, 60.24% applied for Education benefits, and 0.05% applied for PCPG benefits. Veterans who did not have a successful connection with VASS had utilization rates of 0.43%, 32.56%, and 0.03%, respectively. Additionally, in July 2023, VASS launched a VSignals survey to assess Veteran satisfaction with the VASS program and since the launch, VASS-eligible Veterans evaluated their satisfaction with the VASS program as 4.5 on a 5-point Likert scale.

Personalized Career Planning and Guidance (PCPG) Program

The PCPG Program, also known as Chapter 36 services, fulfills 38 U.S.C. § 3697A requirements by supporting transitioning Service members, Veterans, and qualified dependents. PCPG services are designed to provide participants with personalized counseling and support to help guide career paths, ensure the most effective use of VA benefits, and achieve educational and career goals.

The PCPG Program provides career and education counseling to transitioning Service members within six months of leaving the military, Veterans who have left the military within the past 12 months, or at any time to individuals eligible to use a VA education benefit. PCPG career and education counseling services include résumé support, education and employment planning, detailed skills assessment, a personalized action plan to achieve education and career goals, adjustment counseling to transition to civilian employment successfully, and a direct connection to VA benefits and services. For FY 2024 through July 2024, PCPG received 7,308 applications requesting PCPG services. Since FY22, PCPG has seen an increase in applications received. In FY22, it was 6,665 applications received and in FY23, PCPG received 7,714 applications for services.

Milwaukee Regional Office Outreach to Transitioning Service members

The Milwaukee Regional Office (RO) maintains a strong outreach presence across the Wisconsin, including transitioning Service members. During FY 2023, the RO participated in 14 Reserve and Guard outreach events and six to date in FY 2024, assisting Veterans and transitioning Service members at events such as resource fairs and Yellow Ribbon Programs throughout the state. Specific to the La Crosse area, the Milwaukee RO has participated in the La Crosse Veterans Bonanza event, hailed as the "largest Veteran event in the tri-state area," for the past two years, and which is typically held the first weekend in November. Last year, the Milwaukee RO reached approximately 300 individuals at the event, providing information and

assistance on VA benefits and services. In FY 2024, the Milwaukee RO active-duty outreach has resulted in over 3,000 direct engagements with Veterans.

Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) Program Overview

The VR&E Program's mission is to assist Service members and Veterans with a service-connected disability that limits their ability to work or prevents them from working to prepare for, find, and maintain suitable careers or maintain a life of independence. VR&E achieves this mission by providing Veterans with hands-on counseling services to ensure Veteran's goals are not only achievable but attained. VR&E employs nearly 1,000 professional vocational rehabilitation counselors (VRC) and delivers services through a network of almost 350 office locations. Our service delivery model works to support Veterans where they are located and includes operations at all 56 ROs, approximately 142 out-based sites, 70 Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES) installations, and 104 VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) schools/campuses.

The Milwaukee VR&E division continues to demonstrate strong performance in support of Veterans, encouraging and counseling them toward continued education and career goals. There are VR&E out-based offices in Wisconsin (Eau Claire, Green Bay, and Madison), and a VSOC Program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

The Milwaukee RO regularly provides training and monthly briefings to county Veterans Service Officers and Veterans Service Organization partners about all aspects of RO operations, including VR&E. For FY 2024, as of July 16, 2024, there have been over 861 VR&E applicants with 159 positive outcomes and 135 employment rehabilitations for Veterans in Wisconsin. Positive outcomes indicate successful program completion.

VR&E Benefits

VR&E benefits are available for Veterans who received an honorable or other than dishonorable discharge, have a VA service-connected disability rating of at least 10% or more, and apply for services. After eligibility is found, entitlement must be determined and is based on the establishment that barriers to employment exist resulting from a service-connected disability. For those rated at 10%, barriers of a more severe nature must be established.

Active-duty Service members are eligible for the VR&E Program if they expect to receive an honorable discharge upon separation from active duty, apply for VR&E services, and have a proposed IDES rating from VA. Section 1631 of P.L. 110-181 authorized VR&E eligibility and automatic entitlement for Service members with a severe injury or illness before a VA rating is issued. Section 126 of P.L. 115-251 made this authority permanent on September 29, 2018. From October 2023 through June 2024, 11,612 Service members have a plan of VR&E service through the VR&E IDES Program. Of these, 9,318 have separated from the military and are currently using their

VR&E benefits, while 2,294 remain in service and are at various stages in the VR&E Program. This participation allows Service members to identify their career goals and established a plan of VR&E service upon transitioning from the military.

Additionally, in FY 2024, 4,664 Service members began receiving services through IDES but discontinued the VR&E program, while 850 completed their rehabilitation through the VR&E IDES program. In total, 17,126 Service members received or continue to receive VR&E services through IDES in 2024.

During FY 2023, VR&E provided services to 132,687 Veterans and Service members, as well as achieved 17,135 positive outcomes for Veterans and paid over \$1.6 billion in benefits. As of June 30, 2024, VR&E currently has 158,897 Veteran participants with 93,661 enrolled in Long-Term Services. This is a significant increase of 20% since the August 2022 implementation of the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022 (P.L. 117-168). Approximately 12% of our current participants have toxic exposure related disabilities, and this is expected to increase over the next few years. VBA continues to utilize the multi-year Toxic Exposures Fund appropriations to reduce claims inventory and restore pre-pandemic timeliness. VBA's aggressive hiring initiatives resulted in an increase of more than 18% in FY 2023 allowing VBA to significantly increase claims processing capacity. VBA also continues to work closely with military archivists to obtain access to records at the National Archives and Records Administration and at their branch archival facilities to support claim research and is adding additional staff to accelerate research requests with military partners.

The need for VR&E services has increased in recent years. When comparing FY 2022 to FY 2023, there was a 29.8% growth in applications and a 27% increase in Veterans entering benefits plans. In FY 2024, VR&E is expecting an additional 23% increase in Veteran applications and an additional 5% growth in separating Service members. Year over year, the number of eligible applicants processed in Milwaukee has been increasing. For example, last calendar year, from January to June 2023, the local division received 815 eligible applications. During the same time in 2024, the Milwaukee local division received 861 eligible applications. As of June 30, 2024, there are 1,339 Veterans participating in the VR&E Program in Wisconsin.

The VR&E Division continues its active involvement with the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development. In addition to assisting Veterans who are "actively seeking employment," the Milwaukee RO collaborates with Federal, state, county, and city partners. In FY 2024, as of July 31, 2024, the RO assisted Veterans with job placement into 20 Federal, three state, three county, and six city positions. Recognition of outstanding VR&E counselors from the Milwaukee RO has been received from Veterans describing exceptional and responsive services and kind care to assist them with training and education in new career paths. As one Veteran stated, his VR&E counselor motivated and pushed him to do better than he believed he could. He completed his degree and began a new career in construction safety management. He stated his VR&E counselor provided him dignity and direction for a positive future.

VetSuccess on Campus

The VSOC Program is designed to help student Veterans succeed and thrive through a coordinated delivery of on-campus benefits assistance and counseling. The goal is to ensure that student Veterans complete their education with the preparation necessary to enter the labor market into viable careers. The VSOC Program offers various benefits to eligible individuals including adjustment counseling, vocational testing, educational and career counseling, and VA benefits coaching. However, VSOC counselors will try to assist all student Veterans, Service members, and Veteran dependents by referring them to other resources and helping them register for healthcare services, regardless of VA benefit eligibility, utilization, or enrollment status. In FY 2023, VSOC counselors had 20,043 contacts with Veterans, Service members, and Veterans' dependents nationwide. From the beginning of FY 2024 until July 1, 2024, VSOC counselors have had 15,412 contacts with Veterans, Service members, and dependents Nationwide.

Another component of the VSOC Program is the outreach efforts to connect student Veterans with information about training and employment services available under Chapter 31. VSOC counselors present information about VR&E and other VA services at all new student orientations on VSOC campuses, and other events where student Veterans may be present. Career fairs, resume workshops, and student organization meetings are examples of other outreach events a VSOC counselor may host or attend. VSOC counselors are the "face of VA" and make referrals to other VA and non-VA services, such as VA health care, disability services, financial aid, debt management, and peer mentoring programs.

VSOC counselors are vital to ensuring that the student Veterans can effectively use their earned benefits to attend school and receive the most value out of their entitlement. A VSOC counselor on campus strengthens VA's partnership with the school. It improves VA's opportunity to provide outreach and transition services during a student Veteran's or Service member's transition from the military to college life. VRCs and VSOC counselors are also available to assist dependents using VA benefits.

The Milwaukee VR&E division has an ongoing presence at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee campus through the VSOC Program. The VSOC counselor has assisted over 166 students in FY 2023 through June 2024.

Veteran Employment

VA recognizes that there are more needs to be met in the employment space to ensure that Veterans are ready to enter the labor market upon completion of the VR&E Program as well as receive all the assistance necessary to obtain suitable employment. To support this identified need, VA works with the Department of Labor Veterans' Employment and Training Service for more time sensitive, local labor market and job referral expertise for Veterans enrolled in the VR&E program. In June, VA embarked on

an employment pilot for VR&E focused on standardizing training and improving the consistency of the employment coordinator (EC) function. The pilot consists of a total of eight ROs (two per district). The EC position is critical in assisting Veterans achieve suitable employment. In FY 2023, with the assistance of the nationally located ECs, VR&E achieved 17,134 positive outcomes and 10,686 employment outcomes. At the Milwaukee RO, ECs assisted in achieving a positive outcome for 170 Veterans in FY 2023, of which 126 of those received an employment outcome. This pilot will leverage labor market expertise to focus on education and training Veterans for in-demand jobs; expanding specialized partnerships with employers through the increased utilization of non-paid work experience (NPWE); on-the-job training (OJT); apprenticeships; and special employer incentives (SEI). Introducing this consistency in the use of ECs is designed to improve customer service, business partnerships, and consultative services between VR&E staff, resulting in the development of more well-supported rehabilitation plans and increased employment outcomes. It is anticipated the pilot will run for seven months. At the conclusion of the pilot, VA expects that Veterans will have improved access to NPWE, OJT, apprenticeship, and SEI opportunities.

VR&E Longitudinal Study Report 2023

The Longitudinal Study, required by 38 U.S.C. § 3122, follows three cohorts of former participants over a 20-year period and details the current employment metrics of individuals who complete the program. The primary goal of the Longitudinal Study is to determine the long-term outcomes in four major areas: employment, income, home ownership, and use of other programs and services. The Longitudinal Study¹ is published annually, and findings suggest stability and better outcomes for rehabilitated Veterans compared to Veterans who discontinued their VR&E Program, as well as steady improvement of post-program outcomes over time. The 2023 Longitudinal Study finds that the median annual income of rehabilitated Veterans is \$95,000, which is 67% higher than that of Veterans who did not complete the VR&E program. Additionally, rehabilitated Veterans have home ownership rates of 76%, which is 15 percentage points higher than Veterans who do not complete the program. VA recognizes that individuals who choose to discontinue the program may have characteristics that are distinct from those who achieve rehabilitation, limiting the lessons that can be learned from the study. Moreover, the VR&E Longitudinal Study lacks a comparison group, so it is not possible to attribute any differences in Veterans' outcomes to participating in the program.

VR&E Staffing, Recruitment, and Retention

The VR&E Service has placed emphasis on the recruitment and retention of staff to ensure the quality delivery of service. In July 2023, VR&E expanded the qualifying education requirement to be a counselor by accepting five additional Master's degrees which have duties closely aligned with a counselor's duties. This effort increased the number of individuals eligible to deliver VR&E benefits. Since the expansion of the

¹[VR&E Longitudinal Study - Veteran Readiness and Employment \(VR&E\) \(va.gov\)](https://www.benefits.va.gov/VOCREHAB/VRELongitudinalStudy.asp) (Found at <https://www.benefits.va.gov/VOCREHAB/VRELongitudinalStudy.asp>).

degrees accepted, VR&E field staff has grown, and recently, VR&E completed new counselor training for 68 new counselors, the largest training class in VR&E history.

Additionally, a new position has been added to support case management of Veterans in the Chapter 31 program. The Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist position provides direct case management services to Veterans, ensures timely payments, addresses academic issues, and ensures Veterans have access to professional services.

VR&E added over 260 new vocational rehabilitation counselors and specialist staff to address the dramatic growth in the VR&E Program since the passage of the PACT Act. This additional staff reduces the ratio of counselors to Veterans to 1:115, ensuring compliance with the legislative requirements in section 254 of P.L. 114-223. The additional staff will ensure that Veterans in the VR&E Program have access to their counselor and the benefits and services they earned and deserve.

Technology to Improve the Veteran Experience

VR&E is implementing technology improvements to reduce staff administrative tasks as well as improve the Veteran experience. VR&E modernized its electronic virtual assistant (e-VA) to allow counselors to send all letters and forms directly to their clients. Veterans also gained the ability to sign and return documents to VA electronically. The integration of e-VA with the Veterans Benefits Management System, and the integration with Veterans Benefits Administration's Package Manager/e-VA streamlines administrative tasks for counselors, freeing up an average of 10 hours per week per counselor. This efficiency benefits Veterans by allowing counselors to dedicate more time to providing personalized support and expediting case processing. Since the implementation of e-VA, Veterans are now being placed into plans of service, on average, 46 days faster, ensuring quicker access to vital resources. Additionally, e-VA facilitates improved communication channels between staff and Veterans, enhancing accessibility and support beyond traditional means. With the deployment in May 2024, these advancements underscore a commitment to enhancing Veterans' experiences through efficient, technology-driven solutions.

The Readiness and Employment System (RES) will replace VR&E's 25-year-old legacy case management system with a web-based platform that integrates over 20 VA systems and data sources to deliver services and benefits to veterans more timely and efficiently.. The legacy system needs many of VA's modernization efforts such as the document repository and training facilities database. RES automates repeatable administrative processes, saving staff time interacting with the Veterans they serve. The system will automate complex awards calculations for more accurate payments to Veterans while providing intelligent document handling that eliminates staff needing to download, upload, or email individual documents. This new system, through technology, will reduce the administrative functions of counselors, allowing them to focus on counseling Veterans, including creating practical training and independent living plan.

Conclusion

VA appreciates Congress' continued support in improving our support for transitioning Service members and the benefits available to them. VA remains committed to increasing transparency and continuing collaboration with you and our stakeholders. Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. My colleagues and I would be happy to answer any questions you or other members of the Subcommittee may have.