

LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON
H.R. 522; H.R. 2830; H.R. 3601; H.R. 3722;
H.R. 3738; H.R. 3816; H.R. 5190; H.R. 5702;
H.R. 5785; H.R. 5913; H.R. 5914; H.R. 5956; AND
H.R. XXXX

HEARING
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC
OPPORTUNITY
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
Washington, D.C.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:04 p.m., in room 360, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Derrick Van Orden (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Present: Representatives Van Orden, Mace, Franklin, Ciscomani, Crane, Levin, Mrvan, McGarvey, and Ramirez.

Also present: Representatives Edwards, James, Moylan, Budzinski, Kiggans, and Nunn.

OPENING STATEMENT OF DERRICK VAN ORDEN, CHAIRMAN

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Good afternoon. The subcommittee will come to order. I welcome the witnesses and subcommittee members, as well as a few distinguished members that have asked to participate in this legislative hearing today. They will be here at their convenience.

As I have often in the subcommittee, we operate in a nonpartisan way and I am very proud of my Republican and Democrat colleagues for continuing to do so.

We have 13 important legislative proposals to consider here today, and not all the proposals will move forward in this process, unfortunately. The purpose of this hearing is to hear from folks with expertise on assisting veterans about the benefits and shortcomings the various pieces of legislation. Without thorough agency and stakeholder insight the subcommittee would be unable to move several important pieces of legislation so far this Congress. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today on their thoughts on the bills that have been noticed.

A number of these proposals seek to improve the education experience for America's veterans and make it easier for veterans to receive accurate information about their options for using the GI Bill benefits and ensure that they get the best bang for their buck with the GI Bill. As a veteran who served for this Nation for over 26 years, I know how important the GI Bill is for opening doors for

transitioning service members to become productive members of society following their service.

I specifically want to highlight my friend and colleague, Mr. Ciscomani's proposal, the Expanding Access For Online Veteran Students Act. For years, the subcommittee has heard from many student veterans about how the online monthly housing allowance (MHA) is too low and it puts many student veterans who need to take online classes during the summer because they have a family, a job, or not near the college, at a disadvantage and struggling to make ends meet. Mr. Ciscomani's proposal would address these concerns head on for student veterans who take summer courses. It would also allow students attending universities in person in the fall and spring to not have to worry about putting food on the table during the summer. With skyrocketing inflation and the cost of living higher than ever, this bill will help fix and ensure student veterans have access to the resources they need, and I am happy to be one of an original co-sponsors on this legislation.

We will also consider bills to improve suicide prevention and outreach services and advance the home loan program.

We will also consider H.R. 5913. My bill will eliminate bureaucratic red tape and help the lack of accountability that veterans are met with when seeking employment assistance. While this bill would move Department of Labor-Veterans Employment and Training Services (DOL VETS) to a VA, it would not lead to employees being fired or the unions lacking representation. Instead, this proposal will allow for better accountability and oversight between Congress and DOL Vets and ensure the agency is here to serve its veterans first and put everything else aside.

Finally, we will hear from stakeholders at the VA about the idea of a fourth administration. Over the last few years, we have seen Veterans Benefits Administration's (VBA's) number of employees dramatically increase, however, the subcommittee still hears significant concerns about the quality service delivered to veterans from the VBA. To that end, I am going to be asking the VA to provide the subcommittee with a detailed breakdown of employees at Veterans Benefits Administration assigned to address the employment and education needs to our veterans. I think it is very important that the committee understand how these resources are prioritized. Essentially, I just need a list of troop to task—just in military parlance.

I do have grave reservations about several—excuse me—I have reservations about several of their proposals on the agenda today and the witness testimony in question. Members of the subcommittee will ask today—will hopefully address some of these issues so members can make informed decisions about these bills.

We look forward to hearing from the members who have introduced these proposals, as well as our witnesses on how we can continue to improve these bills and create a more economic create more economic opportunities for veterans.

I will now yield to my ranking member for 5 minutes for his opening remarks.

OPENING STATEMENT OF MIKE LEVIN, RANKING MEMBER

Mr. LEVIN. Thanks so much, Chairman Van Orden, for holding this hearing. Important hearing, 13 pieces of legislation in Congress, including this committee. We have got some lost time last few weeks. We are making up for it, and I am absolutely thrilled about that. We have got some really important bills here that we need to get to the floor.

One in particular, H.R. 3848, the Home Act, which will mean thousands of veterans once again being able to travel to medical appointments and be able to receive assistance from VA as winter approaches. Similarly, eager to advance many of the bills before the subcommittee this afternoon, including my legislation, the Veterans Assistance for Loan Origination Relief, or VALOR Act, pretty good acronym, to make home ownership more accessible for transitioning service members with disabilities.

Under current policies, veterans who receive a disability rating after closing on their home may be refunded the VA Home Loan Funding Fee. However, transitioning service members with a pending pre-discharge claim at the time of closing are not eligible for a refund if they later receive a rating. The VALOR Act would make these individuals eligible for a refund, eliminating this disparity. In doing so, it will support disabled service members transitioning out of the military and setting a strong foundation for their civilian lives.

Also on the agenda is Representative Budzinski's H.R. 5785. This legislation would open up the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship Program to more veterans pursuing further education in science, technology, engineering, and math. This program has had exceptionally low participation due to overly restrictive guidelines limiting student veterans opportunities.

I want to thank the chairman for also including H.R. 3738 in today's hearing, which I introduced with Representative Wenstrup to establish a fourth administration within VA to focus on veteran housing, education, and other benefits. Brad and I have been working on this for quite a while. This bill would more closely align VA with how our committee delineates veterans policy issues and elevate economic programs at the undersecretary level, bolstering oversight of these benefits so they can be delivered more effectively.

I do want to raise some concerns regarding the legislation to move DOL Vets programs to VA. The Department of Labor is our government's best place for finding employment resources and has been effective in running the programs within its Veterans Employment and Training Service. Some will remember that when this committee advocated for moving the responsibility for service member transition from Department of Defense (DoD) to VA, we highlighted that DoD did not share the mission or goals of these programs, and that is simply not true for employment and DOL Vets.

Finally, I want to address a proposal to provide full monthly housing allowance for online learning for student veterans. We have got to continue making progress when it comes to providing veterans with access to education, and COVID showed the value in online learning opportunities. Research has shown clearly that you cannot fully replicate the experience of in person learning with online learning. That is true for veterans, it is true for everybody. I

have two young kids at home, so I can attest to this one. I hope that as we discuss the Expanding Access for Online Veteran Students Act, we look at how we can improve learning opportunities, not drive more students to lower performing programs.

I look forward to our work today and moving forward to advance the strongest proposals to full committee as quickly as possible. My thanks again to our chairman for holding today's hearing, and I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Ranking Member Levin.

In accordance with committee rules, I ask unanimous consent that Representative Edwards from North Carolina be permitted to participate in today's subcommittee hearing.

Without objection.

I will now introduce the witness panel.

Our first witness is Mr. Joseph Garcia, the Executive Director of Education Services at the Department of Veterans Affairs. Mr. Garcia is accompanied by Nick Pamperin, executive director of Veterans Readiness and Employment (VR&E) Services, and Mr. James Ruhlman, the deputy director of Education Services. Our second witness is Ms. Margarita Devlin, deputy assistant secretary for operations and management for Veterans Employment and Training Services at the Department of Labor.

I will now swear in the witnesses.

[Witnesses sworn]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Let the record reflect the witnesses have answered in the affirmative.

I ask the witnesses and members today to respect the 5 minute rule. I am just going to say this, you guys know the deal, you have been here long enough that everybody stops at 5 minutes. Thank you for that.

Mr. Garcia, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to deliver your testimony from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

STATEMENT OF JOSEPH GARCIA

Mr. GARCIA. Good afternoon. Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, members of subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss pending legislation that would affect VA's programs and services.

With me is Mr. Nick Pamperin, executive director, Veteran Readiness and Employment Service, and Mr. James Ruhlman, deputy director, Education Service.

Mr. Chairman, with 12 bills on the agenda, I will highlight several in my oral statement as we have provided detailed comments in the full testimony to include areas of support and concern.

VA would support, if amended, section 2 of the Improving Service Member Transition to Reduced Veteran Suicide Act. Currently, VA Solid Start, or VAST, employees conduct personalized conversations tailored to the unique needs of recent separated service members to increase awareness and use of VA benefits and services. VA has concerns that the bill may restrict the intent of the VAST program. VA would support, if amended, the draft bill that waives the loan fee for a veteran obtaining a VA guaranteed loan based on the date of the veteran's pre-discharge medical examination rather than on the date of a rating or memorandum rating for disability

compensation. This would establish an earlier point for a veteran to be treated as receiving VA compensation for home loan purposes. VA supports, but is concerned that it could result in a complex back end refund process that would be confusing for veterans, service members, lenders, and VA employees, and that the bill could lead to an unsustainable financial position.

VA does not support H.R. 3738 that would establish a new Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration. VA appreciates Congress' focus on improving services and resources offered by these programs, however, the current VBA structure reflects the undersecretary for benefits overall responsibility that does include programs related to economic opportunity and transition, as well as compensation, pension, survivors benefits, and insurance. The VBA portfolio forms a suite of resources that veterans can rely on.

VA supports the Veteran Improvement Commercial Driver License Act. VA believes approval of a course offered at a branch with less than a 2 year operation period under certain conditions would provide more training opportunities for veterans, boost employment in this occupational area, and still maintain state approved agency authority and oversight.

VA supports the Deliver for Veterans Act. This is a veteran-centric bill that potentially increases the automobile or other conveyance allowance for veterans. Amending the law to include the shipping costs would remove a cost burden to any veteran utilizing this benefit.

Finally, VA would also support, if amended, to establish an amount payable for the monthly housing allowance under the post 9/11 GI Bill for certain distance learners enrolled during the summer.

Mr. Chairman, as always, VA is open to collaboration with you and the committee to ensure we are providing world class benefits that our veterans have earned and deserve. My colleagues and I would be glad to answer any questions you or member of the subcommittee may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF JOSEPH GARCIA APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mr. Garcia. The written statement of Mr. Garcia will be entered into the hearing record.

Ms. Devlin, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to deliver your testimony.

STATEMENT OF MARGARITA DEVLIN

Ms. DEVLIN. Thank you, Chairman Van Orden and Ranking Member Levin and distinguished members of the subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing.

The mission of the Department of Labor Veterans Employment and Training Service is to prepare America's veterans, service members, and military spouses for meaningful careers, provide them with employment opportunities and resources, promote their employment rights, and protect their employment rights. Today, the subcommittee is considering the Consolidating Veterans Employment Services for Improved Performance Act of 2023, a bill that would transfer VETS from Department of Labor to the De-

partment of Veterans Affairs and likewise transfer the administration of the Jobs for Veterans State Grant, the Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program, the employment related portion of the Transition Assistance (TAP) Program, the DOL's Uniform Services Employment Reemployment Rights Act enforcement responsibilities, and other related responsibilities. DOL strongly opposes this bill.

DOL is the lead Federal department for employment, training, and worker protection programs with extensive resources and institutional expertise in those services which cannot be replicated elsewhere. VETS is closely integrated with and depends on DOL staff and systems across the department to function. This includes VETS staff that are an integrated part of the public workforce system, which is administered by Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration and includes nearly 2,300 American Job Centers across the country. These one-stop locations offer a broad range of career wraparound services to the public, such as job training programs, unemployment insurance, childcare assistance, and many other types of services with priority of services for veterans.

DOL is also one of the largest and most experienced grant making departments within the Federal Government, and our grant officers are a part of the Employment and Training Administration's Office of Grants and Management. Our highly specialized Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) compliance staff similarly work hand in hand with the Solicitor's Office.

VETS depends on and closely collaborates with many other departmental labor agencies and cannot properly function without all the staff, resources, IT, and data systems, and other support provided by and situated throughout the department, which cannot be replicated at VA. If VETS is moved to the VA, then veterans will lose a significant voice within the public workforce system as there would be no longer an agency within the Department of Labor that prioritizes and has the expertise needed to speak on behalf of this military community.

DOL VETS has also been highly successful in accomplishing our mission with positive performance outcomes for our programs. My written testimony details our successes at great length, but in total, across our programs, DOL Vets successfully serves over 440,000 veterans, service members, and military spouses each year. The data shows that all DOL Vets employment and compliance programs are providing historically high performance outcomes. These outcomes are a direct result of the knowledge and hard work of DOL employees and of the processes and relationships that we have built within the department. There is no evidence that moving VETS to the VA would improve efficiency or effectiveness of our programs. On the contrary, it would be incredibly disruptive to our programs and the people we serve. The focus and time of DOL leaders and staff and the resources of our agency would immediately shift away from our successful institution and toward the task of implementing this costly transition to the VA.

I know that we share a passion and commitment for serving veterans and military families. Regardless of the eventual outcome of

this legislation being considered, I want every member to know that I will continue to work with you and your staff, as always, and stakeholders to improve and continue to improve our programs.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify today, and I will happily answer any questions that you have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF MARGARITA DEVLIN APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Ms. Devlin. The written statement of Ms. Devlin will be entered into the hearing record.

We are now going to proceed to questioning and I now recognize myself for 5 minutes.

Mr. Garcia, by the way, you guys know the deal, I read all your written testimony. It is great. Even though I am talking to Kate here, it is about some details, but I have read it all and it is very thorough, and I appreciate the fact that you put a significant amount of work into that. Mr. Garcia, your VA testimony states that the VBA's portfolio is thriving. Could you briefly go into a little bit more detail specifically centered around the word thriving?

Mr. GARCIA. Sir, we are very proud of what we do at VBA, and some of the numbers that we have seen Fiscal Year 2023 are record breaking. I cannot speak for all the business lines, but I do believe in Education Service though we may have a disagreement on certain things, but the GI Bill to me is working for our veterans and for our school certifying officials (SCO). We just passed the 3 millionth enrollment in Enrollment Manager. I can get into more details, but I do believe the record shows that VBA is thriving.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Sir, the last time that you came here and testified on behalf of the VA, we were discussing this, the issues with the subcommittee, and I just—I cannot agree with the word thriving.

For instance, on August 17, a ranking member and I, as well as the Subcommittee on Technology and Modernization, sent a letter regarding our concepts of the Digital GI program. This letter had a deadline for September 15—which was the anniversary of the invasion of Inchon, in case you are in history buff—yet, we did not get a response until nearly a month after that on October 10. Maybe we have different definitions of the word thriving, Mr. Garcia.

If we ask you for a product and we give a deadline and it takes more than or just under a month to get that back over the deadline, I do not think that you guys are operating in an efficient manner and that has shown a cascading effect throughout several of these programs. I mean could you agree that that is a truthful statement.

Mr. GARCIA. For that one time situation, I would agree, sir, but I do not think that conveys the entire year that we have had in Fiscal Year 2023, for example. Earlier I did accept responsibility for that one situation.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. All right. Creating a fourth admin, essentially, in the VBA to handle economic opportunity issues would create accountability to make sure it does not happen again.

I have some concerns about the government bureaucracy. I actually have a lot of concerns about government bureaucracy, but it is clear that there is something with the education program that

might benefit from more attention at a higher level of the VA. One area that might benefit from a higher level of attention is the enrollment manager. VA has touted its huge success, however, the subcommittee has heard that over 50 percent of school certifying officials have problems with the system and our staff has witnessed these problems firsthand. That is a significant amount, Mr. Garcia. I just want you to understand that we have a different understanding of thriving, again, and I think success and a 50 percent failure rate is certainly not successful, and that being able to have a different group that solely focuses on this at a higher level would be beneficial. I understand that you oppose that. Could you tell me briefly why?

Mr. GARCIA. Sir, you mentioned enrollment manager. Again, I have a different perspective. We actually asked for a survey through our NAPA partner—I think you asked for it. The 21 top concerns with enrollment manager, the top 10 I briefed this a few weeks ago at a conference. The top ten concerns with enrollment manager, nine out of the ten were already addressed with releases going back to May. Maybe there is a communication gap. Nine out of the ten issues that were raised were addressed. And the number one issue is also being addressed for a December release. I would have a different perspective when it comes to enrollment manager. I hear more positive news than maybe you hear. Mr. Ruhlman and I have visited SCOs at different conferences, probably over a thousand SCOs. I get a different perspective, sir.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Very well. Thank you, Mr. Garcia.

Ms. Devlin, can you tell me the funding level of the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program and how these funds are being distributed? Have any of these funds been redirected from this program without our knowledge?

Ms. DEVLIN. Thank you for the question.

The budget for Fiscal Year 2023 for the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP) was \$65.5 million, and that includes payments for obligating grants to HVRP grantees, it includes technical assistance, it includes stand downs, it includes information technology infrastructure for the program. Without your knowledge, you know, sir, we did transfer funds, but we did notify the appropriate committee per requirements.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you very much.

My time has expired.

I now recognize Ranking Member Levin for 5 minutes.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Garcia, in your testimony you estimate that the Expanding Access for Online Veteran Students Act, that is my friend, Mr. Ciscomani's bill, would cost \$3.5 billion dollars over 10 years. Does that estimate include behavior changes from GI Bill students? Can you explain what changes you would expect if Mr. Ciscomani's bill became law?

Mr. GARCIA. Sir, so the bill, the way it is presented is for summer programs, right? We do have concerns what does that mean, because in our language, we have summer term summer session. We need some clarity on how summer programs are defined, because, as you know, we have the traditional schools that have the spring, summer, and then the fall, what about schools that, for ex-

ample, have 8 week terms, or rolling enrollment? I have seen that as well. We need more clarity on exactly how that would work in terms of summer programs, for example.

Mr. LEVIN. Do you think the bill might incentivize students to take online classes instead of in person classes?

Mr. GARCIA. If you look at the top 20 schools, for example, a lot of them already are online, Purdue, et cetera. I think those programs are already popular for various reasons. Adult learners tend to want to take online programs, so they are already popular. About 37 percent of those receiving monthly housing allowance, for example, are receiving the online rate. That is a pretty high percentage already receiving the online MHA rate.

Mr. LEVIN. Got it. I think the University of Arizona in his district, I think, is one of those looking to take over. It is also my wife's alma mater. He is not here to defend the U of A.

I will turn to Ms. Devlin. In your testimony on the bill to transfer DOL VETS programs to VA, you point to a likely disruption in relationships with employers, workforce development agencies, and schools. Can you elaborate a bit on why that is the case and how that will impact veterans?

Ms. DEVLIN. Yes, thank you for the question.

Department of Labor VETS funds staff that are integrated into the American workforce system. As such, we are connected to all of the supportive resources that an individual might need, and this includes veterans who would otherwise not be eligible for VA services. Because of our eligibility categories being different, any veteran who walks in our door, regardless of their character of service, regardless of how long they served, will be eligible for assistance at an American Job Center. If they have significant barriers to employment, they are also eligible for the intensive case management services.

We are also integrated across the Department. For example, when we are investigating a USERRA complaint where a Guard or Reservist has had employment issues with his or her employer, we have the Solicitor's Office, which has specific expertise in the law around protection for employer rights. That is not something that exists in VA right now. When you think about all of those things, our connectivity to employers and schools and everything is associated with all of those factors, and those connective tissues.

Mr. LEVIN. Appreciate that very much.

You also noted that the American Job Centers conduct Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) eligibility determinations.

Ms. DEVLIN. Yes.

Mr. LEVIN. It is something I was not aware of. I am curious, how long have they been doing this? Then do you have any data on how many screenings take place every year or how many individuals receive nutrition assistance as a result?

Ms. DEVLIN. I do not have those numbers here with me, and I would have to come back to you with how long it is been. I can tell you I started as a rehabilitation counselor in 1995, back when I worked for the VA, and I remember sending veterans to the DOL American Job Center to work with their Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program (DVOP) to get such supportive services.

Mr. LEVIN. I think it would be great if you take that back and we get those numbers. I think that would be helpful for us to understand the scope of that work.

Mr. Garcia, I will turn back to you on the same bill regarding DOL VETS. The testimony from DOL notes that USERRA compliance staff works closely with DOL's Office of the Solicitor, which has extensive expertise in the nuances of employment law. Because the Office of the Solicitor is not specific to DOL VETS, my understanding is that it would not be transferred under this bill. My question to you is, does VA have an equivalent office that would be able to assist with these important USERRA cases?

Mr. GARCIA. Mr. Pamperin, can you take that one?

Mr. PAMPERIN. I appreciate the question, sir.

Under the current construct, the USERRA legal department resides in DOL. We do not have that within VA.

Mr. LEVIN. That is a no?

Mr. PAMPERIN. Right. Correct, no.

Mr. LEVIN. Right. That is important for us to understand.

10 seconds left, look at that. I will yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you very much.

The chair now recognizes the gentleman from Florida, Mr. Franklin, for 5 minutes.

Mr. FRANKLIN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Devlin, you previously served as the Principal Deputy Undersecretary for Benefits at VA. In that role, you would have been tasked with managing both VA readiness and employment programs. Having served in both VA and DOL VETS, which program do you feel is better equipped to serve the specific needs of vets related to employment needs?

Ms. DEVLIN. Well, sir, I do not think I can answer that question the way that you have asked it. What I will tell you is they serve different veterans with different eligibilities. For veteran readiness and employment, a veteran has to have a service-connected disability to qualify, versus the American Job Center and the clients that we serve do not have to have a service-connected disability to receive services. It is sort of like comparing apples to oranges in terms of the difference of populations that we can serve. We work together, which is the beauty of it. A VR&E eligible veteran who needs extra employment assistance or wraparound services, we work together. We have an Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in place to work together with the Veteran Readiness and Employment program, we have a monthly work group that meets, and even at the executive level, we meet with all VBA leaders of the Economic Opportunity Suite with my leaders at DOL VETS to make sure we are integrating and looking for opportunities where we can collaborate more.

Mr. FRANKLIN. It all comes down to really whether it was just a service-connected disability or not, as to whether—I mean given a preference of which direction you would refer someone, would you feel more comfortable referring a veteran to one program or the other?

Ms. DEVLIN. In many cases, I would refer them to use both programs if they are eligible for both.

Mr. FRANKLIN. Okay.

Ms. DEVLIN. Yes, so they just have different eligibilities. If a veteran does not have a service-connected disability, I would absolutely send them to the American Job Center. I actually asked my son to go when he got out of the Marine Corps to go to the American Job Center for support.

Mr. FRANKLIN. Okay. Do you think there is any overlap between the programs?

Ms. DEVLIN. There is no overlap, but they are complementary to each other, so they are different. You have got rehabilitation counselors, which I will defer to my colleague here if he wants to elaborate on the VR&E program, but rehabilitation counselors who provide a different array of services than a DVOP who is really focused on the employment piece and making sure the connectivity happens with all the wraparound services. They are related and connected and complementary, but not overlapping.

Mr. FRANKLIN. Okay, well, thank you.

Mr. Pamperin, if you could expand on that a little bit, I would appreciate it.

Mr. PAMPERIN. Absolutely, sir.

Within the Veteran Readiness and Employment Program, you are assigned a counselor, and you heard Ms. Devlin talk about over 400,000 veterans and service members and family members that they serve within the VR&E program. It is a shade over 130,000 annually is what we serve, and it is designed for employment at the end goal. The counseling occurs with the veteran as they are going through, in most cases, a traditional 4 year college or university that goes through the retraining.

One thing I would like to just state as far as the collaborative relationship that we have, because of DOL's connectivity, in 2021 we launched an apprenticeship pilot, a highly underutilized pilot with our partners at DOL VETS. Because of that partnership, we have seen the apprenticeship program grow by 30 percent since 2021. That is due to the interconnectivity that we have as DOL VETS and VR&E.

Mr. FRANKLIN. All right. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you.

The chair now recognizes the gentleman from Kentucky, Mr. McGarvey, for 5 minutes.

Mr. MCGARVEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you all so much for being here. Really appreciate it.

Again, this is a committee where we care about our veterans, we care about how they are taken care of. I know you all share that goal and we want to make sure they continue to get the best benefits that they have earned and they deserve.

One of the bills I wanted to turn to today is one that I know I am a co-sponsor of. I think that the sponsor might be here as well. It is the Student Veteran Work Study Modernization Act. This is a bill that will provide work study for veterans who are at least a half time basis, meaning more vets from all economic backgrounds can access better schooling or vocation training while trying to make ends meet along the way. Something we know happens frequently, and we see, certainly in my district in Louisville, Kentucky.

Mr. Garcia, the VA recommends that H.R. 3601 be made permanent rather than the pilot program that is proposed right now. Can you explain why making this program permanent is important?

Mr. GARCIA. Yes, sir.

Over 6,000 use the Work Study program currently, and certainly reducing it to half time would increase the access. The 5 year pilot, I compare it to the Vet Tech Program, another program that you are familiar with that is also a pilot. What tends to happen toward the end of that pilot period, both the training providers and the applicants may get confused or do not pursue it because you have an end date to it. That would be the reason why, using that example, why, if it was made permanent, I think it would have less confusion, especially toward the end of that 5 year pilot.

Mr. MCGARVEY. Thank you. I agree with that.

Ms. Devlin, I want to turn to the work of DOL VETS and appreciate the work DOL VETS is doing to make sure that our veterans do have employment when they come home, something that is so important as our veterans come back into civilian life.

One area I want to highlight that we could collaborate more on, as I understand it, currently less than 2 percent of post 9/11 GI Bill recipients utilize the on-the-job training option for their training pathway to a family sustaining career. Can you elaborate on DOL VETS efforts to promote apprenticeships for veterans, service members, and military spouses, including through the on the job training (OJT) programs?

Ms. DEVLIN. Yes, sir. I can. Thank you for the question.

We work with employers, and one of the things we have in Department of Labor, of course, is the Office of Apprenticeship, which lends its expertise to VETS. We have employees in our own organization that have a really good understanding of it. We have a Veteran Employment Outreach Program, and what we do is we connect with employers and help them to understand how to develop apprenticeships. Then if they are interested in the GI Bill, as we have a really good collaborative relationship with VA, we can help connect them, help them to understand how to become eligible for a registered apprenticeship, which then makes them eligible for the veteran to use their GI Bill.

As Mr. Pamperin mentioned, we have also worked with the VR&E Division because it is important for a vocational rehabilitation counselor to understand that an apprenticeship is not what it used to be. Right. There is lots of apprenticeship opportunities to help veterans see the value, if that is a path that they would be interested in. We have helped them to connect more employers as well.

Then, of course, we work with DoD SkillBridge and DoD United States Military Apprenticeship Program (USMAP) to also make sure that employers are understanding how to reach transitioning service members before they get out of the military to connect them into employment through apprenticeship.

Mr. MCGARVEY. Appreciate that.

What do you think is the rationale, in our remaining time, why it is such a low number, why that number is at 2 percent? What do you think we can do to get that up or help you all to bring that number up?

Ms. DEVLIN. I think part of it is education and helping individuals, the service members and veterans themselves, to understand that there are high wages to be earned through apprenticeship. I think there is sometimes a misunderstanding about what apprenticeship is, what kind of careers you can choose from, and so that education needs to happen. Also, I think using the GI Bill for college, which is sort of the more traditionally accepted route, does result in a different housing allowance than if you go through the apprenticeship or an OJT option. I think sometimes that can be a partial reason because you need living wages, living expenses.

Mr. MCGARVEY. Yes, I think that is an important point you just brought up, so I want to hone in on it for a second. What is that difference in housing allowance? If you are looking at a traditional 4 year degree or a training program? We have got 18 seconds.

Ms. DEVLIN. I do not have the exact answer for that, but they are different. I know we have VA colleagues here who may be able to answer that more effectively. But it is versus the full-time rate, it is based on the difference between journeymen and trainee wages, from what I understand.

Mr. MCGARVEY. Thank you very much.

I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mr. McGarvey.

The chair now recognizes the gentleman from Arizona Mr. Crane, for 5 minutes.

Mr. CRANE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Garcia, there is a lot of discussion around the Veteran Improvement Commercial Driver's License Act of 2023 and whether the legislation as written would allow Commercial Driver's License (CDL) schools to establish a branch campus across state lines. Does VA interpret the legislation to allow schools to open branch campuses over state lines? If so, what safeguards are in place to ensure that the State Approving Agencies (SAAs) are still involved in the approval of these institutions?

Mr. GARCIA. Sure.

The way the bill is written, if the branch follows the same curriculum as the main location, if you will, we definitely believe that SAAs ought to be involved. As I understand it, if it crosses state lines, that SAA at the other State would have to provide that approval for the location in the other State besides the main office.

Mr. CRANE. Thank you.

Next question for you, Ms. Devlin. You were saying that the Department of Labor does not support 3738. Is that correct? Bill 3738.

Ms. DEVLIN. Yes, sir.

Mr. CRANE. I believe you said the systems currently under Department of Labor cannot be duplicated elsewhere. Can you expand on that a little bit more?

Ms. DEVLIN. Yes, sir.

One of the examples I would give is the Office of the Solicitor, which has attorneys that specialize in employment protection law. That does not exist in the VA. The VA does have attorneys, they have their own system there, but it is not that area of expertise. That is one area that we would be lacking if we were moved to the VA. We also have other expertise related to employment protections with other agencies in DOL.

The other piece that is important is we are part of the American workforce system. There are other services in that system that support the wraparound services that a veteran might need, you know, housing, food assistance, transportation, clothing, and things like that that the VA cannot offer.

Also, again, as I mentioned before, that veterans who are not eligible for VA services are still eligible for our services in the American Job Center.

Mr. CRANE. Thank you very much. Appreciate it.

I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mr. Crane.

The chair now recognizes Mrs. Ramirez from the great State of Illinois.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Thank you, chairman, from the great State of Wisconsin.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. You get 6 minutes.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Thank you. I am learning, I am learning.

I want to thank the witnesses for being here today as well, from the many states that you come from.

When I went back home during this August recess, I hosted Veterans Roundtables in my district. One of the prevailing concerns that was raised to me was the issue of housing and homelessness for the veterans in Illinois Third congressional District. This has been a long standing issue that traces far. When I was the executive director of a homeless shelter, I had the honor to serve many veterans who were experiencing homelessness. Having access to secure and stable housing, we know, right, we all agree, is critical for veterans and their families and ensuring they have the resources necessary to have a home is essential. Now, districts like mine, buying a home is becoming harder and harder. A home that would cost \$300,000 now may cost \$700,000, rents that used to be maybe \$800 are now \$1,800 for a one bedroom or a studio. Clearly, housing continues to be a big challenge for our veterans and their families.

I am thinking about access to home ownership. Mr. Garcia, in regards to the proposal from my colleague, Ranking Member Levin, to retroactively waive home loan fees for veterans with service-connected disabilities, the testimony calls for a better process for service members to use the home loan program prior to discharge. Transitioning service members are given information about the loan program, my understanding, during transition. However, prior to that, what are the resources that are currently available for service members to know about the home loan programs?

Mr. GARCIA. Ma'am, can I ask Mr. Pamperin to take that one?

Ms. RAMIREZ. Sure.

Mr. PAMPERIN. Ma'am, the loan guarantee program is briefed out through TAP. As far as communications before that, a service member does have the ability to use the loan guarantee program. Specific communications related to that prior to, I would have to take back and talk with my colleagues in the loan guarantee program and provide you a better answer.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Yes, I would appreciate that. I think it is really important that we have different avenues to ensure that our veterans

have adequate information about what resources are available to them, and certainly this one being one of those.

I want to shift a little. I have talked about housing, but the other priority for me here, as a member of this committee, has been to advocate for the importance of education and employment opportunities for veterans. Veterans who served our country deserve every single resource that is available to them. We cannot fulfill this promise to our veterans by compromising programs that have the potential to help veterans thrive while transitioning into civilian life.

Ms. Devlin, this question is for you. You note in your testimony that the proposal to transfer the DOL VETS to VA would remove subject matter experts from DOL involved with administering programs outside of VA's scope. Could you elaborate which program specifically you are referring to?

Ms. DEVLIN. Yes, ma'am. Thank you for the question.

Really, all the programs. However, what I think is important to note is for the protections, the employer protections for National Guard and Reserve members, when they have an issue and they have a case that we are investigating and researching, we have investigators who specialize in that. I think this bill would move those investigators over to VA, but what the bill does not move is the Solicitor's Office, which is where we have our attorneys that provide that extra expertise so that when we have a complicated case, we have attorneys that can help us decipher and make sure we do everything in our power to protect that Guard or Reservist employment rights and get their rights restored. That is one example.

The American Job Center and the Jobs for Veterans' State Grant is another example of an organization that we operate that is integrated into an American Job Center that serves all veterans and all American citizens. Pulling it out of Department of Labor and moving it to VA would certainly restrict the access to those veterans, because now they would be going to the American Job Center without that advocacy of somebody from DOL VETS being able to connect them and making sure that they get priority of services in that system.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Got it. Thank you.

I have 14 seconds left, so I will ask a question, and it is yes or no so that I do not get cutoff by the chair.

Will this transfer cause a disruption in veteran services? Yes or no?

Ms. DEVLIN. Yes, ma'am, it would.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Got it. Thank you.

Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Wow. Right on time.

In accordance with committee rules, I ask unanimous consent that Representative James from Michigan be permitted to participate in today's subcommittee hearing.

Without objection.

The chair now recognizes Mr. Mrvan from the state of Indiana.

Mr. MRVAN. Ms. Devlin, in 2015 a similar bill was introduced to move vets from the DOL to VA due to the concerns about VETS performance and outcomes for veterans. Has the performance of

VETS programs improved in recent years? What are you doing to measure the customer or veteran satisfaction?

Ms. DEVLIN. Thank you for the question.

Yes, we are actually doing a lot to measure satisfaction. In fact, what I will highlight is for the Transition Assistance Program and the employment pieces of that that we administer, we have the highest satisfaction rate. We do that because we listen to the customer experience. We not only have surveys that ask specific questions of our transitioning service members about their experience in the class, we ask them for open text comments. We go through all of those open text comments, and we look for patterns and we look for things that we can change. Every time we do that, we learn something more about how to make the program better. I will tell you our latest survey results, 95 percent of service members that went through our part of TAP said it enhanced their confidence in their transition.

We also had the Employment Navigator program, which is new as of 2021. Of the service members that work with a Navigator, one on one, 98 percent said that the Navigator either met or exceeded their expectations. That is a pilot program which we are making a permanent program. It is at several military installations.

We have done everything in our power to make sure we listen to the service member experience. We recently kicked off a Customer experience initiative in our Jobs for Veterans State Grant to make sure we understand, because the employment landscape has changed, how people look for jobs has changed. We want to make sure we are meeting that service member or veteran where they are at.

We have also—and this is just very fresh—started a customer experience initiative in our Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program. Customer experience is very important to DOL VETS.

Mr. MRVAN. In your written testimony you alluded to the multiple touch points that you have in the American workforce system and in the Department of Labor to support veterans. Can this network be replicated if you are no longer within the DOL?

Ms. DEVLIN. No, sir. It cannot be replicated in the Department of Veterans Affairs. That infrastructure does not exist there.

Mr. MRVAN. Okay, thank you.

With that, I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mr. Mrvan.

In accordance with committee rules, I ask unanimous consent that Representative Budzinski from Illinois and Representative Moylan from Guam be permitted to participate in today's subcommittee hearing.

Without objection so ordered.

The chair now recognizes Mr. Edwards from North Carolina for 5 minutes.

Mr. EDWARDS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and ranking member and committee. I appreciate you allowing me the opportunity to wave onto this committee. It certainly is an honor, even though it will only be for just a few short minutes, to share my support for H.R. 2830, the Veterans Improvement Commercial Driver's License Act of 2023, which is a bill that I am leading to increase veteran

access to timely, quality commercial driver's license training, to increase the truck driver workforce pool, and to help reduce the strain on our Nation's supply chain that is currently worsened by the severe truck driver shortage.

Across the United States, the trucking industry is facing more than a 78,000 driver shortage, which some estimate could reach 160,000 by 2030. The shortage is complicated in part by burdensome red tape restricting veteran access to commercial driver's license training using their GI Bill benefits. Trucking shortages have a ripple effect, I know that you realize, through our Nation's supply chains, worsening bottlenecks and delaying delivery times. My bill seeks to reduce the strain on our Nation's supply chain and bolster workforce development among veterans by eliminating the red tape currently inhibiting veteran access to CDL training programs and increasing the pool of eligible truck drivers.

Currently, roughly 8,400 commercial driving programs are approved for use by eligible veterans under the GI Bill. A statutory 2 year rule under the GI Bill prevents these training facilities from accepting GI benefits at secondary locations for 2 years. This burdensome red tape has excluded many veterans from attending closer secondary branch training facilities that offer the exact same curriculum as a pre-approved facility. It has been forcing veterans to travel further or wait 2 years to pursue their CDL.

My bill would exempt new branches of pre-approved training facilities from the statutory 2 year wait to accept veterans benefits and protects the integrity of the GI Bill by requiring that all secondary locations submit an annual report verifying their curriculum is identical to the primary location.

This bill is a common sense reform with wide organizational support that will reduce unnecessary roadblocks to veteran training and workforce opportunities. I look forward to working with the House Veterans Affairs Committee to move this forward.

If I may, I have one question for Mr. Garcia. I remain grateful for the Department of Veterans Affairs' support of this bill. That said, concerns have been raised that the bill's language does not clearly require the secondary facility to be within the same state as the primary facility. My intent was to ensure that this exemption only applies to facilities within the same state. Do you know if the Department has any concerns with their interpretation of this specific language?

Mr. GARCIA. Sir, so first of all, if it is good for the veterans, good for the economy, and we still have that state approving, agency authority and oversight are the main concerns that we have. As you say, if that branch with the same curriculum is within the same state, we do not see any issues there.

Mr. EDWARDS. Would the Department prefer that it only apply within state lines versus nationwide?

Mr. RUHLMAN. I would not say that we have a preference either way. We would gladly carry out that law as passed. We think there are probably less concerns if it is in State because the same state approving agency would be approving both locations and therefore would already be familiar with the business practices and the financial stability of the main campus, which would probably be advantageous.

Mr. EDWARDS. Thank you. Thank you all for being here.

Mr. Chair, ranking member, again, thanks for allowing me the time to be here.

I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mr. Edwards.

The chair now recognizes Mr. James from the State of Michigan.

Mr. JAMES. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for allowing me this opportunity to speak on behalf of my district and my Nation.

We are all here because we believe very, very strongly that we have a job to serve those who have served us.

I am here to speak and seek a little bit of guidance for my H.R. 3816, the Veterans Entry to Apprenticeship Act. As a combat veteran and a former business leader, I recognize two gaps that we have in this Nation. There is a skills gap with people who are able to address the jobs of now and in the future. We need to do more with apprenticeship to allow the Veterans Affairs to recognize pre-apprenticeship programs and treat them as apprenticeship programs to lower the rungs, to increase access for veterans. There is also not just the professional side, but the purpose side. We are facing a hopelessness crisis in this Nation, and veterans are bearing the brunt of this and enabling additional resources for veterans to pursue the American dream without dismissing the reality of the cost to the American taxpayers are a part of the balance that we need to achieve.

I want to thank everyone, particularly the chairman, for allowing me to seek your guidance and advice on how best to do this on the veterans' entry to apprenticeship.

I would like to echo the sentiments of my colleague, Ms. Ramirez, mentioning the criticality of housing. One of the components of this bill would allow veterans who are entering this pre-apprenticeship program to be able to allocate some of these resources to critical needs, such as housing and transportation. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) has already scored this at \$60 million—with an M—\$60 million over the next 10 years. Do you have any advice for how we can proceed with lower or level cost and how long the housing benefits should last, because housing is critical.

Mr. GARCIA. Sir, there are roughly 18,000 currently in the apprenticeship program, for the registered apprenticeship program. Our concerns are that in the pre-apprenticeship program, that is not registered. That are our concerns that we have that it kind of levels the playing field for veterans that would use and burn up their benefits. For a pre-apprenticeship program the concern is perhaps they do not have the same measurable outcomes from Department of Labor. It is a concern that we have to even accept this as an entitlement.

Mr. JAMES. Understanding that there is a need and understanding that additional draws on resources might be a concern, what are some things that we can do to address this? One of the things that we looked at is state approving agencies making sure that the programs that are approved meet the standards that are required for folks to be able to matriculate into jobs that pay well and actually helping veterans and not another government gift. Are there ways that we can make sure that we have this accountability down to the lowest level, but also making sure that we are

able to help veterans where they need it the most, most notably with housing in this case?

Mr. GARCIA. Sir, we would welcome to work with the committee and you on this initiative, but you are right on target, we would definitely want the state approving agencies to have that same authority and oversight to make sure that we have quality programs. That would address the major concern that we would have.

Mr. JAMES. This is a bipartisan bill, this is not a messaging bill. This is critical to the health of our Nation. Echoing your sentiments, Mr. Garcia, if it is good for the veteran, if it is good for the economy, then we are generally heading in the right direction.

We also need to make sure that we get it through the House, we get it through the Senate, and something that can be passed. The fact that it is bipartisan helps. Working very closely with you and your colleagues and me and mine, we welcome the opportunity.

One last thing I would like to mention is, as we move forward, if there is anything that we see that can improve this bill, I just want to State for the record, Mr. Chairman, that I am open and willing to make whatever tweaks are necessary to help our veterans.

With that, I want to thank you each for your time and your service.

I yield the rest of my time, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mr. James.

The chair now recognizes Ms. Mace from South Carolina for 5 minutes.

Ms. MACE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Ruhlman, the Government Accountability Office report from September 2022 showed the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship had an alarmingly low participation rate since its inception, raising concerns about barriers, preventing beneficiaries from accessing the benefit. To your knowledge, has the VA done an extensive analysis of those barriers preventing veterans from using the benefit?

Mr. RUHLMAN. VA is looking—

Ms. MACE. Is that a yes or a no? Have you guys done anything yet?

Mr. RUHLMAN. It is in progress.

Ms. MACE. Okay. Thank you.

Would it be beneficial to have more information about the barriers, in your opinion?

Mr. RUHLMAN. More information is always better.

Ms. MACE. How long will it take? How long have you been working on trying to get more information and how long will it take to gather?

Mr. RUHLMAN. I cannot answer that right now, but I can get—

Ms. MACE. Why cannot you answer it?

Mr. RUHLMAN. I do not personally run the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship.

Ms. MACE. Okay.

Mr. RUHLMAN. We can get that answer. We are aware of the study and the barriers, and we are looking at them.

Ms. MACE. Okay, super. Thank you.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) report also highlighted the analysis the VA did of those who were denied the ben-

efit was very limited. Is not it true that this analysis did not include denial reasons for both race or gender?

Mr. RUHLMAN. Could you rephrase the question?

Ms. MACE. Is not it true this analysis did not include denial reasons for either race or gender?

Mr. RUHLMAN. We would not have denied them because of race or gender. I am not certain whether the demographics were associated with that.

Ms. MACE. Okay.

My office has worked closely with Wounded Warrior Project to come up with some solutions based off data they have found in their own Wounded Warriors Women Warriors Report. Women veterans are the fastest growing population of veterans, but they focus also on unique challenges when transitioning. The unemployment rate among Wounded Warrior Women Warriors is higher than most male warriors at 10 percent, compared to 6.3 percent of their male counterparts. Census data suggests that only 27 percent of women are employed in STEM fields in the U.S. workforce, but comprise almost half of the overall workforce today.

I look forward to working with you and the VA and my colleagues here today on this committee on this important legislation, to ensure that we are addressing the unique needs of each and every veteran.

Thank you and I yield back. Mr. Chairman.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Ms. Mace.

In accordance with the committee rules, I ask unanimous consent that Representative Kiggans from Virginia be permitted to participate in today's subcommittee hearing.

Without objection.

The chair now recognizes Ms. Budzinski from the great state of Illinois.

Ms. BUDZINSKI. Thank you, Chairman Van Orden and Ranking Member Levin for giving me the opportunity to speak on my bill today. I very much appreciate it.

H.R. 5780, the Veterans in STEM Expansion Act. Veterans put their lives on the lines to serve our country, yet they are still facing significant barriers to employment and educational opportunities upon returning. According to the Journal of Veteran Studies, over 200,000 service members transition to civilian life each year and among their top struggles is finding a job and getting connected to educational opportunities. I believe everyone in the room can agree with me when I say that our veterans deserve better.

Congress took positive steps when it passed the Forever GI Bill in 2017, which brought much needed changes to veterans educational benefits. Part of this major legislation included enacting the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM scholarship. Since enactment, thousands of veterans have used the scholarship to pursue STEM degrees after exhausting their post 9/11 GI Bill benefits.

Though this has been great progress, student veterans have voiced their frustrations with some of the very limiting requirements. Additionally, a 2022 GAO report highlighted some of the barriers student veterans have faced when applying for the scholarship. Barriers have included meeting the credit hour requirements, exhausting GI Bill benefits before being able to apply, and the in-

ability for student veterans to use scholarship toward graduate school classes. The Veterans in STEM Expansion Act would modify all three of those levers by reducing the minimum number of credit hours required to 45 hours. It would also allow student veterans to apply for scholarship even if they still have GI benefits left. The scholarship would only kick in after recipients have exhausted GI Bill benefits. Last, my bill would allow student veterans to use the scholarship toward graduate school classes.

The changes proposed in this bill are straightforward ways to improve access to this important scholarship for our student veterans and ease the transition for those pursuing a higher education.

I am committed to working with my colleagues, the VA and Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) on my bill to ensure we are all doing all that we can to expand STEM education for all veterans. I do appreciate Congresswoman Cherfilus-McCormick and Congressman McGarvey for already agreeing to co-sponsor this bill.

Thank you for the time. I appreciate it, chairman.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Ms. Budzinski.

The chair now recognizes my friend from Guam, Mr. Moylan, and we wish you a hafa adai, sir

Mr. MOYLAN. Hafa adai, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and members of the subcommittee for allowing me to wave on to discuss this important bill that helps our veterans in Guam.

I appreciate the current panel and their discussion about the bill and their support, but I would also like to extend my gratitude to our witnesses in the next panel, respectively, the Organizations of Disabled American Veterans (DAV), Student Veterans of America (SVA), and the Veterans of Foreign War VFW), for supporting our mission and endorsing our bill.

I am proud to represent a district that is filled with patriots who have served our country with dignity, honor, and respect. We must give them our sincerest gratitude and respect for their service. Being a veteran in Guam is not easy. From long waiting times at both VA clinics and hospitals in Guam to lack of complex veteran healthcare services, Guam's veterans have been left in the dark for way too long, especially our disabled veterans. Currently, there is a program called the Adaptive Vehicle Grant Program that provides \$25,600 to eligible veterans so that they can purchase an adaptive vehicle. My bill, the Deliver for Veterans Act, will improve this program by allowing the VA to put funds from each veteran's grant toward shipping costs. To ship a vehicle to Guam it costs close to \$4,000. Under the current program, veterans are unable to use their grant to pay for shipping costs. This is a major cost that negatively affects our veterans in remote areas, like Mr. Crane's district and my district of Guam. With this high transportation costs, only those who can afford to ship the vehicle will do so.

This small fix in the program will allow more veterans to take advantage of this program that helps them in everyday life.

Again, I want to thank the subcommittee for allowing me to wave in on today's hearings, and I ask for their support in delivering for our disabled veterans.

Mr. Chair, I would like to waive any additional time I have if I can have additional remarks regarding their support for this measure please.

Mr. PAMPERIN. Good afternoon, sir, and I appreciate the question.

VA does support this legislation. It is the right thing to do. Currently, we do have the ability to cover adaptive automobiles, just not the shipping. As you were discussing, that is an additional financial burden. We know that in doing research that the average shipping cost is about \$1,650. Obviously, Guam and some more remote places are going to be higher, but even just with the average shipping cost, that actually would stay below the average grant rate. Right now, the average grant is a little over \$23,000. Just adding in that average shipping cost would still be below the max grant. It is the right thing to do and that is why we support the legislation, sir.

Mr. MOYLAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mr. Moylan.

The chair now recognizes the gentlelady from Virginia, Ms. Kiggans.

Ms. KIGGANS. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Thank you for letting me sit on your meeting today to talk about my bill, H.R. 5956, the GI Improvement Act.

I just wanted to briefly describe it. In exchange for serving our country veterans get a chance to pursue almost any post-secondary education they want, whether it be for college, graduate school, or training. I was able to use my GI Bill to go back to nursing school. We are currently using my husband's GI Bill to provide education for one of our children. It is a great benefit that we need to be very protective of and make sure our veterans are able to utilize use it to the best possible extent that they can.

The GI Bill has been life changing for millions of our Nation's former service members. In 2022, more than 800,000 veterans had been using their GI Bill benefits. Unfortunately, understanding the benefits of the bill can be incredibly complicated and overwhelming. The GI Bill comparison tool is something that we have now. It is a vital part of navigating these benefits. It is used widely by veterans. It is a web based portal that is supposed to provide just a simple, easy way to access the different information to compare universities for our veterans. Every school who accepts the benefits offers this GI Bill comparison tool to their prospective students, but it has not been updated for quite some time.

Additionally, many different Federal agencies collect data that I think would be useful for veterans to know, including graduation rates, student loan default rates, and others. My bill seeks to increase transparency and centralize this useful information for veterans within this already existing tool and would require VA to work with other agencies and key department stakeholders to continually update the tool as more information becomes available. Some of the new information that would be included on this portal would be retention rates, transfer rates, graduation rates, credentials, certifications, available average duration of degrees, student loan default rates, student loan repayment rates, and more. Pro-

vide a lot more information when veterans are comparing just different schools that they may use their GI Bill benefit at.

By providing this additional information, my Bill allows those seeking to use their GI Bill benefits to obtain education to make the most informed choice possible. I introduced this bill to improve transparency and provide more resources for those looking to use GI Bill benefits so that veterans can be well informed when deciding how to use them. It will help our veterans to be well informed, and it will increase educational opportunities for our Nation's heroes.

Thank you so much, and I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Ms. Kiggans.

Thank you. The witnesses are now excused. I hope you all stay around for the second panel.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Yes, well, on our second panel we will hear from the following witnesses, Ms. Keenan, the deputy director at National Legislative Service for the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Mr. Barefield, assistant national legislative director at Disabled American Veterans, Ms. Barlet, vice President of Government Affairs at Student Veterans of America, Mr. Wescott, legislative director at the National Association of State Approving Agencies, and Mr. Hazard, Veterans in Piping program manager for the United States Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of Plumbing and Pipe Fitting Industry of the United States and Canada.

I would like to welcome our witnesses to the second panel. Will you please stand and raise your right hand?

[Witnesses sworn]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Let the record reflect that all witnesses have answered in the affirmative.

Ms. Keenan, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to deliver your testimony.

STATEMENT OF KRISTINA KEENAN

Ms. KEENAN. Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and members of the subcommittee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States and its auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to provide our remarks on legislation pending before the subcommittee.

The VFW's views on all the bills can be found in my written testimony. I will take the opportunity to highlight a few.

The VFW supports the Expanding Access for Online Veteran Student Act to increase the monthly housing stipend to the national average for veterans who take summer courses online. Currently, the monthly housing allowance for online courses is half the national average, which is simply not enough for many student veterans. If they take courses during the summer, even online, they should not experience a significant decrease in their housing benefit that could cause them financial hardship. While this is a step in the right direction, the VFW would like for student veterans to receive at least the full national average rate for housing, even if they are not enrolled in degree programs conducted online for some or all semesters. Online education has adapted and grown since the COVID-19 pandemic, much like working from home, has changed the work model. Student veterans, who are often non traditional

students, continue to require housing assistance to successfully pursue higher education, even when enrolled in online programs.

The VFW supports the Veterans Education Transparency and Training Act. This would modify the requirement for schools to provide a personalized shopping sheet with specific and individual information about costs and financial assistance. The new language would give schools more flexibility by lessening the barrier to receiving VA education funding. The legislation would also create a single VA website for school officials to find current training. Schools have told us this would be helpful because when they receive staff turnover, updates sent only by email get lost over time. We suggest adding to Section 1A that all policy and guidance updates be included on this VA website, as these are equally important as training. We also recommend that VA be required to update the information in a timely manner, because having a website with old information is equally ineffective.

The VFW supports the draft bill to waive the VA home loan fee for service members with a service-connected disability who apply for the loan before receiving their disability rating from VA. Current housing market uncertainty has created an environment for service members where they may not be able to wait until VA has completed processing their disability claim before finalizing the purchase of a home when the right opportunity arises. This proposal would ensure that service members who have started their VA claim and conducted a pre-discharge exam could be reimbursed for the home loan fee if they receive a disability rating after purchasing their home. We suggest one key change, to replace the pre-discharge date with the effective Date. The intent to file establishes the claim's effective date, and it never changes, unlike exams, which can be scheduled and rescheduled. Using the effective date would avoid any ambiguity and would ensure that service members retain the earliest date for eligibility.

The VFW would also like to ensure that if this proposal becomes law, that veterans have the flexibility to choose what is in their best financial interest. We would hope the options to pay down the principal of the mortgage or to receive reimbursement from VA would both be available as some service members pay these fees out of pocket.

Last, the VFW supports the draft bill to modify the requirements of the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM scholarship. We support amending the specific credit hours required for eligibility in addition to extending this benefit to graduate degrees. Barriers for students to utilize this scholarship should be lessened, as we want veterans to pursue and succeed in high demand fields like STEM.

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, thank you for the opportunity to provide my remarks. I look forward to answering any questions you or the committee members may have.

Thank you.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF KRISTINA KEENAN APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Ms. Keenan. The written statement of Ms. Keenan will be entered into the hearing record. Mr. Barefield, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to deliver your testimony.

STATEMENT OF MARQUIS BAREFIELD

Mr. BAREFIELD. Thank you. Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting DAV to testify at today's hearing of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity to consider the 13 pieces of legislation up for discussion this afternoon. My written statement has been submitted for the record, and I will now highlight a few bills that are important to DAV and our members.

In my early days after being medically retired from the United States Army, I can speak personally about the difficulties that I experienced when I left the military more than 25 years ago, when TAP was in its infancy stages and mental health services were not part of the program. Dealing with the pain of my service-connected disabilities and the uncertainty of what my life was going to be like after the military, I suffered from depression and anxiety. I could have benefited from having access to some type of mental health services. For example, H.R. 3722 and the amendment in the nature of a substitute to it would provide valuable mental health services to transitioning service members, veterans and their families. It is important that transitioning service members and veterans fully understand the importance of having mental health services available to them. I know and understand what some of the current transitioning service members and veterans are going through that have lost the sense of community that the military hails for them. The men, women and families who are going through this transition can benefit from knowing that valuable mental health services are available to them during and after the TAPs classes.

DAV supports H.R. 5785, the STEM scholarship program. By broadening the eligibility and decreasing the number of semester or quarter hours required to become eligible for this scholarship, this will increase the number of students who wish to pursue careers in this very important area. Employees that have STEM careers make on average \$93,000 per year, which is substantially higher than the national average.

DAV supports H.R. 2830 as it would help ease the pathway for veterans to acquire a commercial driver's license, helping to address the trucking shortage, employ veterans, and strengthen our supply chains. This legislation would ensure CDL schools that offer courses at new branches do not have to wait 2 years if the primary institution has been approved by the VA and state approving agencies to receive GI Bill benefits. Many former military personnel have experienced driving large vehicles during their military careers. According to the American Trucking Association, there is currently a shortage of 80,000 truck drivers. There is a high demand for truck drivers across the country, with some positions paying nearly \$100,000 per year. It is estimated that 8,400 commercial driving programs have been approved for use by eligible veterans under the GI Bill. This legislation would create unique opportunities for service disabled veterans to obtain a CDL and overcome their employment barriers.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, H.R. 3738 would establish a fourth administration within VA dedicated to creating economic opportunities for veterans, their dependents, and survivors. This would increase the visibility and accountability of all veteran education and

employment related programs, anticipating veterans long-term needs not only for health care and disability compensation, but also for education and employment opportunities. A fresh new approach is required.

Given all the responsibilities of VBA and their focusing on claims and appeals processing, other programs have taken a backseat. For example, the Veterans Readiness and Employment Program started working on an electronic case management system for vocational rehabilitation counselors. However, after 9 years, 3 failed attempts for a digital platform, and over \$20 million spent, VR and E still does not have a digital case management system. DAV believes that the failures of the VR and E case management system is indicative of a lack of focus, direction, as well as a constant change of administrations. This is one example of many why we believe VA needs a fourth administration. H.R. 3738 would be a huge step in the right direction to solving this problem.

This concludes my testimony, and I am happy to answer any questions you or members of the subcommittee may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF MARQUIS BAREFIELD APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mr. Barefield. The written statement of Mr. Barefield will be entered into the hearing record. Let us not do that again, please. Thank you.

Ms. Barlet, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to deliver your testimony. Seriously? I just said let us not do that again. Is it yours? Yes. There you go. Adapt. Overcome.

STATEMENT OF TAMMY BARLET

Ms. BARLET. Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America to testify before you today and always, we appreciate the opportunity to share our views on the bills which will directly impact student veterans, military connected students, their families, and survivors.

We encourage the subcommittee to review our written testimony for the detailed discussion on the education related legislation for today's hearing.

My verbal remarks will focus on two bills.

I will begin by addressing the Expanded Access for Online Veteran Students Act. The prevalence of online classes in higher education has skyrocketed in the last year, in the recent years. This trend is prior to the pandemic, but the forced shift online learning during COVID led many institutions to invest in methods to offer their classes online. Many institutions, including a growing number of flagship public and nonprofit universities, continue to increase their online courses offering, which appeals to the broader range of students, including post traditional students, while juggling other responsibilities like family and jobs. Institutions are also exercising a new discretion in how they offer their courses, sometimes choosing only to offer certain courses during particular terms. That is the important piece for GI Bill students and their MHA.

We have reached an era in higher education where not only otherwise in person GI Bill students are safe from the negative financial consequences of the outdated and misinformed policy of reduc-

ing MHA for online learners. I am going to tell you a story about one of the SVA's incredible chapter leaders, Josh Jones. Josh is an SVA Veteran of the Year, and former chapter leader of Loyola University in Chicago. Some of you may be familiar with Josh. He was recognized during the Joint VSO and Military Service Organization (MSO) hearing before the House and Senate Committees on Veterans Affairs this past March, and it was shortly time before then Josh flagged to SVA this issue that ultimately led to this bill. Josh and some of his peers soon found out that their institution was only offering the classes they needed online over the summer and quickly found themselves enrolled fully online and only eligible for the reduced MHA rate for online learners. This slashed their housing allowance by well over \$1,600 a month, leaving them grappling with how to make that difference over the span of the 3 month term. Josh recognized how fundamentally unfair this was and, with the support of SVA, spearheaded an effort to bring a legislative fix to Congress so other military affiliated students would not have to experience the same hardship. In March of this year, members of the subcommittee heard from Josh and SVA about this very issue.

We are proud to appear before you today and announce our strong support for this legislation. While SVA would have preferred the bill fully harmonize MHA rates for online learners, there is no denying that represents a substantial improvement over the current law that will roughly put an extra \$1,000 in the pockets of online GI Bill learners over the summer. This bill represents a pivotal first step toward the ultimate goal of securing full MHA for online GI Bill students.

SVA thanks subcommittee staff for their work on this legislation, and we applaud Representatives Ciscomani, Van Orden, Stansbury, and Stanton for their bipartisan leadership on this issue.

Last, I will turn to the Student Veterans Work Study Modernization Act. VA Work Study is an invaluable program providing participants with critical financial support during their studies, but the program limits eligibility to those who are enrolled at least 3/4 time. According to SVA's most recent survey, roughly 50 percent of our respondents have children and approximately 20 percent identify as single parents. For most of these folks, enrolling at a rate that is less than 3/4 time might be the best fit for them and their families, but this cuts them off from the program. The bill before you today will address this issue by establishing a pilot program that expands the eligibility of those enrolled at least half time. The bill will also require VA to collect and report important new information about how VA's Work Study is serving student veterans. This legislation is just one part of the larger effort to modernize VA Work Study.

We commend this bill's sponsor, Congressman Cartwright, and his leadership in the complementary and comprehensive VA Work Study Improvement Act. That bill was first conceived by a former VFW SVA fellow, John Randolph, and would make critical requirements to the VA Work Study so that it can perfectly serve its participants.

This concludes my verbal remarks. Thank you for your time and attention, and I look forward to your questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF TAMMY BARLET APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Ms. Barlet. The written statement of Ms. Barlet will be entered into the hearing record.

Mr. Wescott, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to deliver your testimony.

STATEMENT OF JOSEPH WESCOTT

Mr. WESCOTT. Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin and members of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, I am pleased to appear before you today on behalf of the 52 member state agencies of the National Association of State Approving Agencies (NASAA). I appreciate the opportunity to provide comments to this committee about the legislation pertaining to veterans education and training.

H.R. 2830, the Veteran Improvement Commercial Driver License Act, while well meaning, causes NASAA great concern in its present form. As drafted, this bill sweeps away the protections provided for veterans under the 2 year rule for private and not for profit non college degree (NCD) institutions. That rule requires that these educational institutions must be in existence and approved for at least 2 years by other necessary state regulatory authorities. The institution must also have successfully offered the program for approval for that same period. This is an important safeguard preventing an NCD institution, such as a truck driving school, from gaining approval without demonstrating a measure of quality and stability in its continuous operation.

This bill as presently drafted only requires that an institution offer the same curriculum as a previously SA approved institution anywhere in the Nation and has met the requirements for licensure to apply for approval. When we approve a program for approval, particularly at a new location, curriculum is only one factor we review. We also carefully evaluate instructor qualifications, administrations, equipment, policies and procedures, and the technical ability of the location to administer the program. We do this to ensure that only programs that demonstrate quality educational outcomes for students are approved. To determine program quality, it is important that we have some record of success, such as graduation rates or job placement, to review and evaluate. NASAA respectfully suggests that this legislation be amended so that the institutions which apply for a waiver from the requirements of the 2 year rule must be within the same state as the initial campus upon which the institution bases its application.

Also, we strongly suggest that the legislation provides that the institutions must show a history of having successfully taught the program at that location for a set period of time, preferably 1 year, but certainly not less than 6 months. We oppose this bill in its present form.

The Transparency for Student Veterans Act of 2023, this would allow student veterans to make informed choices about which schools and programs would be the best fit for them. It provides them the additional information to do that. We certainly support that bill.

H.R. 3816 the Veterans Entry to Apprenticeship Act, while we certainly agree with the purpose of this bill, NASAA suggests that safeguards be added to protect veterans enrolled in these programs.

For instance, we believe that any pre-apprenticeship program applying for GI Bill benefits should meet the standards found in U.S. Department of Labor issued Training and Employment Notice 1212. Likewise, we would like to see these programs demonstrate a record of successfully placing veterans into a registered apprenticeship program. Most importantly, we feel they must be approved by a state approving agency. We support this bill, but with suggested amendments.

H.R. 5914 addresses the need for veterans to seamlessly access their hard earned education benefits to facilitate a successful transition to civilian life. This legislation amends the requirement for a shopping sheet to state that SAAs will only disapprove programs when facilities fail to provide certain forms to the maximum extent possible.

Also, this legislation requires a centralized communication platform for improved communication between VA and SCOs. NASAA believes this new language will ensure veterans have access to quality programs by providing flexibility to institutions such as police academies, truck driving schools, and other approved NCD institutions, while still providing adequate safeguards for veterans and their families. We strongly support this bill.

Mr. Chairman, today, SAAs throughout this great Nation are diligently working to protect the quality and integrity of the GI Bill and to ensure that our veterans and their families have unfettered access to quality training and education programs.

I thank you again for this opportunity. I look forward to your questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF JOSEPH WESCOTT APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mr. Wescott. The written statement of Mr. Wescott will be entered into the hearing record.

Before I recognize Mr. Hazard, I want to thank you for your persistence. I know that this has been a hassle to get you here and I do appreciate it. We are very thankful that you are able to make it.

Mr. HAZARD. Thank you, sir.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. You know, how many times did it take now? A couple. Our House is more in order and we appreciate you being here.

With that, I recognize you for 5 minutes to deliver your testimony.

STATEMENT OF MICHAEL HAZARD

Mr. HAZARD. Good afternoon, Chairman Van Orden and members of the committee. My name is Mike Hazard and I am employed by the United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipe Fitting Industry of the United States and Canada, which we typically just refer to as UA.

As Program Manager of the UA's Veterans and Piping Training Program, or VIP Program, I want to thank the committee for giving me the opportunity today to share the successes we have had at the VIP program in helping transitioning servicemen and women prepare for a career in the plumbing and pipe fitting indus-

tries, and to offer the UA's views on several bills currently being considered by this committee.

First, I would like to briefly share some information about my background and the important work that we do at VIP. I first joined the UA as a pipe tradesman in Santa Barbara, California in 1987. Soon after that, however, I placed my UA career on hold and joined the United States Navy, where I proudly served as an aviation rescue swimmer and H-46 helicopter mechanic for 11 years. I was honorably discharged from the Navy in 1999 while holding the rank of Petty Officer First Class.

Following my discharge from the Navy, I was able to pick up where I had left off at the UA and return to work as a journeyman pipefitter. After working in the field for several years, I was offered and accepted a position as a training coordinator for a regional apprenticeship program in Southern California, where I facilitated plumbing and pipe fitting training for over 10,000 UA members. I was promoted to executive director of this training fund in 2008, which is the position I held until I accepted my current position at the UA in 2012.

In my current position, I manage the day to day operations of the nine VIP training sites located at seven military installations across the United States. Under the VIP program, the UA offers departing servicemen and women from all branches of the military the opportunity to participate in an intensive 18 week training program on base, which they receive at no cost to either the government or the student. When the training is successfully completed, the graduates are guaranteed a job and are placed in one of the UA's best in class gold standard apprenticeship programs. Since its inception, I am proud to state that the UA VIP program has provided apprenticeship opportunities to over 3,170 military veterans.

I know from my own personal experience how valuable it can be when transitioning back to civilian life to feel that an organization like the UA has your back. Reconnecting with my UA brothers and sisters and taking advantage of the work opportunities in this thriving industry certainly made the transition more manageable for me. It has therefore been deeply meaningful for me in my current position to be able to provide a similar experience to other veterans by connecting departing service members with both the training opportunities and support systems provided by the UA VIP program.

With this background behind me, I will now summarize the UA's views regarding several bills currently being considered by this committee.

First, the UA would like to express its support for several pending bills mentioned in the hearing invitation I have received. These include H.R. 3601, the Student Veteran Work Modernization Act, H.R. 5190, the Military Family Protection from Debt Act, the draft bill proposing to modify the requirements of the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship, and the draft bill proposing to waive certain fees that are charged in connection with housing loans guaranteed by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. These are measured, common sense reforms that will provide tangible benefits to veterans and military families and which we believe can receive broad bipartisan support.

On the other hand, I would also like to take the opportunity to express the UA's opposition to the draft bill titled Consolidating Veterans Employment Services for Improved Performance Act of 2023. Broadly speaking, this bill would transfer the work performed by the Vet's Office at the Department of Labor to the Department of Veterans Affairs. While I am sure this bill is well-intentioned, I believe that is misguided and would not advance the interests of transitioning service members. The VA has a very important mission, but job creation is not typically understood as being a significant part of that. On the other hand, I have been working with the DOL vets office for 15 years, and I am consistently impressed with the workforce development experts there. It is my experience that the DOL Vets office has played an important role in connecting veterans with the apprenticeship programs that are also registered with the DOL. The Vets office has done a terrific job at facilitating effective communication and collaboration between DOL, DoD, and the VA. I believe that changing the structure of the DOL Vets office in the manner proposed would result in much more harm than good, and I would, therefore, ask the committee not to move forward with that particular bill.

That concludes my testimony, and I would like to thank the committee again for this opportunity, and I am ready to answer any questions you may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF MICHAEL HAZARD APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mr. Hazard. The written statement of Mr. Hazard will be entered into the hearing record.

We will now proceed with questioning and I recognize myself for 5 minutes.

Ms. Keenan, can you comment on the benefits of the current GI Bill comparison tool and whether it would be beneficial to veterans to add information that is currently collected by the Department of Education?

Ms. KEENAN. Thank you for that question, Mr. Chairman.

The more information that we can provide to student veterans, prospective student veterans, so they can make the most well informed choices for them, we are in favor of. Adding more information, I think, is only going to help people make their decisions.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Very well. Thank you.

Mr. Barefield, as the principal mission of DAV is to help rehabilitate and support disabled veterans, do you believe H.R. 522, the Delivery for Veterans Act, would be widely used and beneficial for disabled veterans?

Mr. BAREFIELD. Thank you for the question.

The short answer is yes. Service disabled veterans should not have to pay for a benefit that they have earned to include automobile adaptation, even if it requires them to have a vehicle shipped to them. This is something that they should not have to incur the cost for.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you very much.

Mr. Wescott, do you interpret H.R. 2830 to allow truck driving schools to cross state lines on opening a new branch campus?

Mr. WESCOTT. Yes, sir, I do.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. Can you maybe explain for folks what the beef is with having stuff from one state to the other? I asked this because I have the largest contiguous section of the Mississippi River of any Member of Congress, so I can go from Minnesota to Iowa to Illinois within a 15 minutes drive. Maybe you could explain some of your reservations about this, please.

Mr. WESCOTT. Certainly, sir.

Those reservations are based upon the fact that, for one thing, if we are going to modify the 2 year rule, which I think is an important protection for veterans, while at the same time I understand the need for more truck drivers, it is very important that we are very careful in how we do that by keeping it within the same state you have an SA who is familiar with not only the state requirements, but is also familiar with the base institution that they approved. We are extending that from the one that they have already approved. If we do not safeguard that, then we would be in a situation where somebody could get approval in the state of, say, Idaho, and now the 2 year rule is effectively swept away in North Carolina. That is concerning to me, and there is my concern.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. We are just having a discussion about contiguous states. It is an issue with us. We are going to work with you on this. I understand that some tweaks—we can accept that. I would like real explicit stuff. I know there is great stuff in your written testimony, but truck driving is a fantastic job, and if we can get our guys and gals behind the wheel and actively employed it to be fantastic.

Mr. Hazard, as a program manager of the UA VIP program who previously worked as the training coordinator for the Regional Apprenticeship Program, do you think that H.R. 3816, the Veterans Entry into Apprenticeship Act, would be helpful for veterans to utilize their GI benefits and gain entry level experience in the field? Do you have any concerns about this program?

Mr. HAZARD. The pre-apprenticeship?

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Yes

Mr. HAZARD. My concern with that, chairman, is wages. What kind of jobs are the—apprenticeship is designed with stepped wage increases as you work through the program and you complete the requirements. Pre-apprenticeship implies that you are automatically going to be an apprentice, and there would just have to be some benchmarks in there to ensure that somebody's ready to be an apprentice. I really think—

Mr. VAN ORDEN. I also share some concerns about this, not from that perspective, but from the perspective if you go from pre-apprenticeship program to pre-apprenticeship program to pre-apprenticeship program, you may be burning your GI bills. By the time you get to where you really want to be, you may not have enough benefits left to complete that degree. Let us talk about this in future.

Mr. HAZARD. Okay.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. But because I understand Mr. James' intent and I think it is very valid. We have just got to figure out how to do it properly to make sure that the veterans are well served.

With that I yield back and I recognize Mr. Levin, Ranking Member Levin, for 5 minutes.

Mr. LEVIN. I thank the chairman. Thank you all so much for being here. Thank you for your testimony.

Ms. Keenan, I will start with you. I want to thank the VFW for their support of the VALOR Act. VA noted in its testimony on the bill that some veterans postpone using the home loan benefit until after they receive their rating so they can avoid paying the funding fee. What impact does that have on their financial well being and housing stability, especially during the period of transition?

Ms. KEENAN. Thank you, Mr. Ranking Member, for that question.

We know that the first 12 months after somebody separates from the military is the most critical and where they have the highest risk for suicide. Housing instability is a big concern for us. A transitioning service member who's filed a VA disability claim should not have to wait for VA to make a decision, a life decision, to purchase a home, which creates stability for them and their family and their children. We want them to have this be a stress free process and to be reassured if they do receive a rating later from VA that they can get that fee back.

Mr. LEVIN. Well, I appreciate that.

A related issue, some transitioning service members close on a home before receiving their rating, often because they erroneously think they are going to be refunded later. In fact, this happened to a constituent of ours who brought this to our attention and prompted our team to write this bill. The question is, do you believe the current inability of individuals in this situation to receive a refund once they get a rating is consistent with the spirit of the fee waiver?

Ms. KEENAN. I do not think that that was the intention of the fee waiver. I think particularly for this group of transitioning service members to veterans, that there should be this allowance for them because the process may be lengthy for VA. We know there is a bit of a backlog at the moment, so we want to make sure that there is no frustration for them in this process.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you for that.

I also appreciate VFW's suggestion to use the effective date rather than the date of examination. My understanding is that the effective date cannot be earlier than the day after separation. Individuals who close on their homes while on active duty would not be considered eligible for a refund. Can you speak to that?

Ms. KEENAN. I would have to look into that. If they could use their intent to file date, which would be the earliest possible date, if that would be affected by their date of discharge, we would have to look into that and ask our team.

Mr. LEVIN. Happy to follow up on that one and grateful for your support again. It is an example of a constituent having an issue that is leading to legislation. Hopefully, if there is any veteran listening to this, contact your Member of Congress, particularly if they are on this committee, and you never know, we might be able to do something about it legislatively.

I will turn to you, Mr. Hazard, because I know that you had to reschedule and you came from Idaho, et cetera, and also because I represent Camp Pendleton and I had the chance to go and visit

the UA's VIP program there. Shout out to my friend Sean-Keoni Ellis from the UA.

Wanted to ask you what we can do to improve access to employees and their ability to access SkillBridge. I know you have got a tremendous amount of experience with SkillBridge, I know that it is both DOL and DoD. I would love if you could share with the time that we have left thoughts that you have on SkillBridge?

Mr. HAZARD. Absolutely.

SkillBridge is a life changer, really. It is changed the way we transition out of the military for the better. It is guarantees, it is a smooth transition from the military into the workforce with guaranteed employment. That is the way the UA does it. I think we need to look at the utilization of SkillBridge by transitioning service members before we worry about getting more employers involved. Right now some of our military partners are reporting to us that it is 5 to 10 percent utilization of transitioning service members. I know from—personally, my son was attached to an EOD unit and his commander's policy was, nobody is going to SkillBridge. We need to get some guidance in there and some teeth in SkillBridge so people that want to participate can.

Talking about the employers and the SkillBridge providers, we need to do a better job at screening those folks, too. What it is supposed to be is employment, and it is supposed to be at little or no cost to the service member, and it is supposed to have a high probability of employment, and very few of those providers are doing that.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you.

I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Ranking Member Levin.

In accordance with committee rules, I ask unanimous consent that Representative Dunn from Iowa be permitted to participate in today's subcommittee hearing.

Without objection.

The chair now recognizes Mr. Ciscomani from the great State of Arizona.

Mr. CISCOMANI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Always good to see you, sir. Thanks to all the witnesses for being here today to discuss and provide feedback on a number of bills. I have enjoyed your testimonies. I have had the pleasure of touring the University of Arizona's Veterans Education and Transition Services, or VETS, as it is called, the center in September and I was able to hear firsthand from veterans and issues they face when seeking higher education.

One topic that came up was the monthly housing allowance for online students. As you know, veterans taking online classes currently only receive half of the national average for their monthly housing allowance. Post COVID more student veterans are choosing online classes. For example, a constituent who is a gunnery sergeant in the U.S. Marines who is dealing with this issue reached out to me in the message. He said, and I quote, "The MHA rate has been a massive influence on my decision and ability to use my earned benefits." Especially for veterans like him who have families or other time commitments, taking online classes can provide much needed flexibility. I also met a young retired, also—well, formerly served a single mother in the Veteran Center, wondered the

same issue. That the reason she was taking these classes was because of her situation with her kids and that was what worked for her. I was pleased that my friend and chairman here, Chairman Van Orden, partnered with us and me and introducing H.R. 5702, the Expanding Access for Online Veteran Students Act, which would increase the monthly housing allowance for veteran students taking online classes to match the amount students receive for in person classes.

While this bill is limited to the summer semester, I believe it is an important step in bringing parity in MHA reimbursements for in person and online students.

My first quick question here to Ms. Keenan, how has education changed for VFW's membership in recent years? Have you seen a greater number of VFW memberships attend online school?

Ms. KEENAN. Thank you for the question, Mr. Ciscomani.

We know that veterans are often non traditional students. They may have a spouse, dependents, they may work, they may have service-connected disabilities that limit their ability to go and do things in person every single day. Our membership is attending more and more online classes. The essence of why we support this bill is because we want students to have the flexibility to choose what is best for their life circumstances. The housing benefit is going to ensure that they are successful, that they have the stability that they need.

Mr. CISCOMANI. Thank you. Thank you.

Ms. Barlet, I appreciate the testimony you submitted to the committee and the assistance our office received from Student Veterans of America in drafting this legislation and your testimony both written and today. You mentioned Josh Jones, who was previously the SVA chapter president at Loyola University. Can you elaborate why the MHA for online students can be difficult for students as they enroll in classes with limited availability?

Ms. BARLET. Yes. Thank you, Representative Ciscomani.

Actually, Josh Jones is in town this week. As SVA's Student Veteran of the Year he is placed on SVA's board of Directors, and they are all having a meeting.

Mr. CISCOMANI. Wonderful.

Ms. BARLET. Looking at as a student veteran, you are looking at not just the degree that you are pursuing, but the institution that you want to pursue that degree. Then you also have the opportunity, keep in mind that you have two choices, you can do brick and mortar or you can do an online class. Even as Josh faced, a brick and mortar was his intention, but as he went along his degree, his summer classes were forced online. A budget that he had produced for himself had had the MHA all lined up that he would be a brick and mortar and have that institution MHA kind of like took him for a step back when his classes were forced online during the summer session and then he was forced online then decreasing by almost \$5,000 for that 3 month term.

Like Ms. Keenan mentioned, for student veterans we have a lot of things going on in our life. I myself took my master's degree online prior to COVID at George Washington University, and I felt the education I got at that time really helped me sustain to where I am right now. Not only was the classes an opportunity to fit with-

in my schedule, but I studied globally with other students from around the world and I was able to share my culture as a veteran and American and how I was seeing our health system at that time and then also getting ideas and seeing other things through other individuals' eyes. By the time I was finished with my master's degree, I had a better perspective.

Mr. CISCOMANI. Thank you. Thank you so much.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mr. Ciscomani.

The chair now recognize Mrs. Ramirez from the great State of Illinois.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Thank you, Chairman.

In the first panel we talked a little bit about housing and certainly we started talking also about employment. I want to thank every single witness for being here. I know that the last few weeks we have been trying to get our committee hearings up and running, so we are glad you are here. I want to also just give a special thank you to the Student Veterans of America for your critical work you do to ensure that veterans receive and maximize their education benefits.

As you know, self improvement and self sufficiency are interconnected with education, employment, and housing. Often I say that housing stability intersects with financial stability, and therefore education and employment are critical to that.

I want to go in a little bit more on housing, which we did a little in the first panel, but I think it is just following up to what Congressman Ciscomani was talking about, particularly around housing allowance. Any of you, I mean, can you describe how important it is for veterans to have access to housing and the kinds of barriers veterans face when they do not have that full housing allowance?

Ms. BARLET. Thank you, ma'am, for that question. I will go first.

By not having that parity of the monthly housing allowance kind of kicks off their budget for their monthly ideals and how they can expense the rest of their expenses through their budget. I know myself my rent is the first thing I pay and if I do not have that money up full, that kind of puts me behind for everything else. Financial security in a house is going to give you safety and safety is just going to help your mental stability as you are going through and studying and being that individual in your community and that family member that your family needs.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Yes, thank you.

I want to switch a little, and I want to ask Ms. Barlet specifically the legislation titled Expanding Access for Online Veteran Students Act, it would aim to make all programs for all students eligible for full MHA during summer terms. That has resulted in this proposal having a significant cost, according to the CBO. Is this proposal the ideal way you would aim to assist students experiencing particular hardships accessing individual programs, or would you model legislation differently to assist students?

Ms. BARLET. This piece of legislation is definitely a starter conversation and we hope that this leads to more conversations to have the parity of MHA as an online learner and as a brick and mortar learner.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Thank you, Chairman. I yield back. Thank you.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mrs. Ramirez.

The chair now recognizes Mr. Nunn from the great State of Iowa.

Mr. NUNN. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First, I want to say thank you to our fearless chairman here from the great State of Wisconsin, both a VFW and an American Legion fellow. I appreciate your service and honored to serve with you in that capacity in our new roles today.

With that, I would like to take us back to where we are presently. Many in this community are combat veterans like ourselves, others are members of our community who are watching as equally horrified as I am with the events unfolding in Israel. The destruction of that community forces us as Americans to reflect upon our own service, our commitment to our family, our friends, and those who we live with. I am here today not just as a U.S. Member of Congress, but as a 20 year Air Force veteran who has served in combat operations as many here around the world. It is as a commander I watched my own forces struggle with life that came after their military service.

Today I carry before us a message for those who can no longer speak. Specifically, I speak in honor of Corporal Adam Lambert, a proud Marine from Adel, Iowa, in my home community. He loved his family, he loved his friends, and he loved his country. He put himself before family, friends, and country time after time. Adam bravely served our country in the Marines, deploying to Okinawa and then on to Afghanistan. During boot camp, he made a battle buddy named Daniel Harvey from Rhode Island. These two became fast friends and connected through their deployments and tried to maintain that through their return home to the U.S. At 22 years old, Daniel became a victim of suicide just after a year leaving the Marines. Adam, his best friend, followed with him less than a month later.

Adam was a beloved son and a brother and a friend. Unfortunately, this story is all too common for our fellow service members when they come home from duty. In my home State of Iowa, sadly, we have a suicide rate for veterans four times that of the national average. Something, Mr. Chair, has to be done. That is why I am proud to work with members in this room when I led the introduction of H.R. 3722, the Daniel J. Harvey, Jr. and Adam Lambert Improving Service Member Transition to Reduce Veteran Suicide Act.

As we all know, veteran suicide is another casualty of war, one that demands immediate attention and action by our Members of Congress.

I want to thank you to the committee is here today and speak a little more specifically on what we can do to continue to help our veterans as they transition at some point from their military life to their civilian life.

Mr. Barefield, I will begin with you first. I want to thank you for your support. I want to speak specifically to the Transition Assistance Program and speak to any issues that have gone unnoticed or overlooked in recent years and how we could continue to improve this program even further, sir.

Mr. BAREFIELD. Thank you for the question.

As I mentioned in my oral statement, when I went through the TAP program more than 25 years ago and the way that I felt after I left my years of service with the United States Army, there were days where I just felt I was thrown away. I got a service-connected disability and was released basically because of the fact that I was non deployable anymore. In those initial months after service, I felt like nobody really cared. Being able to have mental health services available to me during that timeframe would have been very beneficial. I did not do the ultimate act like the gentleman that you mentioned earlier, but it was not far from my thought process. Being able to have those services available are crucial because you are talking about a very tender time period. Those first 12 months after being medically retired, retired or discharged from service, is a very tender time. A lot of service members are out in the fog about what to do or what is available to them. Being able to indicate and note those services are there for them is very important.

Mr. NUNN. Thank you, Mr. Barefield. I would agree.

Deputy Director Keenan, thank you for your service as well and your continued service with the VFW.

You recommended including provisions that would require a health assessment and treatment plans to be conducted in private at the VA. Talk to us about what the current practice is and if there is any recommendations you would have on that front for mental health.

Ms. KEENAN. Thank you for that.

I think our recommendation has to do with including this in TAP and having an opportunity within the program for some one on one private counseling, if that is required by the service member, if they seek that, so that they can actually discuss some of those issues, maybe outside of the class, but still with somebody who can provide the resources that they need.

Mr. NUNN. Much appreciated. Thank you.

We can all be strong and uniform, but as we make that transition, we need that access to it.

Mr. Chair, I yield my time, and thank you for your service.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Well, thank you, sir.

Mr. Nunn, you are always welcome here, and I hope you understand that the support behind your bill is unanimous. There are a couple things we got to tweak on it, but you know it is my number one legislative priority as the chairman of the subcommittee to prevent veteran suicide.

We are good? He is an Air Force guy. You know.

I want to thank everybody for coming here today. It is critically important that we get together periodically and talk about these things.

Before I turn over to Ranking Member Levin, Ms. Keenan, I understand that there are some people that came to this committee hearing today?

Ms. KEENAN. Yes, I have my family here.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. If you are related to this veteran, please stand up. Okay. Then there is a guy right there with the mask on. What is his name? Stand up, you. Hey, I am talking to you, pal. What is your name, son?

Mr. GIANNINI. My name is Luke, sir.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. You are an Army veteran?

Mr. GIANNINI. I am.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. What are you doing 48 hours from now?

Mr. GIANNINI. I am getting married to Ms. Keenan.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. That is right, he is getting married! Hey, if you want, when we get done here, get your family and everybody come up, we will take pictures behind here and everything. It is a big day. Congratulations very much. You guys are all awesome.

I now recognize Ranking Member Levin for his closing comments.

Mr. LEVIN. I cannot follow that. We will just leave it there. Appreciate it.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. This hearing stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 4:09 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

PREPARED STATEMENTS OF WITNESSES

Prepared Statement of Joseph Garcia

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin and other Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting us here today to present our views on several bills that would affect VA programs and services. Joining me today are Mr. Nick Pamperin, Executive Director of Veterans Readiness & Employment Services, and Mr. James Ruhlman, Deputy Director of Education Service.

H.R. 522 Deliver for Veterans Act

This bill would amend 38 U.S.C. § 3902(a) to add the total shipping price to deliver an automobile or other conveyance to the financial assistance provided to a Veteran as part of VA's purchase of an automobile or other conveyance for an eligible Veteran.

VA supports this bill, subject to the availability of appropriations. It is a Veteran-centric bill that could increase the automobile or other conveyance allowance benefit for Veterans.

Under section 3902(a), the total purchase price of an automobile or other conveyance currently includes payment of all state, local and other taxes in VA's automobile allowance benefit. However, the Veteran bears an unstated and unintended burden for any shipping costs relating to a vehicle's purchase. Amending the law to include the shipping cost could remove a cost burden to any Veteran using this benefit.

This bill has no additional language to define what constitutes "total shipping price" for delivery to the Veteran. Shipping prices can vary depending on the geographical locations involved and the shipping methods used. VA could implement this section in regulation to define more specific parameters on how shipping costs would be defined and calculated.

Additionally, VA notes that if this bill were enacted, the limit on the total amount of authorized financial assistance as defined in sections 3902(a) and (e) would remain intact. Section 3902(a) states: "The Secretary, under regulations which the Secretary shall prescribe, shall provide or assist in providing an automobile or other conveyance to each eligible person by paying the total purchase price of the automobile or other conveyance (including all State, local, and other taxes) or \$18,900 (as adjusted from time to time under subsection (e)), whichever is the lesser." Thus, shipping costs would be paid only if the total purchase price of the vehicle is less than the current maximum payment of \$24,115.12, effective October 1, 2022.

In the context of automobile allowance benefits for Veterans, VA recommends that Congress make technical corrections to amendments made by section 22 of the Veterans Auto and Education Improvement Act of 2022 (P.L. 117-333). Section 22 amended the definition of medical services under 38 U.S.C. § 1701(6) to include the provision of medically necessary van lifts, raised doors, raised roofs, air conditioning and wheelchair tiedowns for passenger use. We understand this section was intended to codify VA's existing practice of furnishing certain items, including van lifts, raised roofs, air conditioning and wheelchair tiedowns for passenger use as articulated in paragraph 5.e. of Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Handbook 1173.4, Automobile Adaptive Equipment Program. However, VHA has used these as examples, whereas the statute defines these specifically as the only types of modifications that are permissible.

Consequently, we recommend technical amendments to 38 U.S.C. § 1701(6) to authorize lowered floors, ramp and kneeling systems, mobility device lifts (not just van lifts) and ingress or egress accessibility modifications. We also recommend wheelchair tiedowns not be limited for passenger use. We believe these changes would reflect Congressional intent and not inadvertently limit the scope of an existing benefit. VA's practice has evolved, consistent with its policy and with industry standards, to include modifications to the types of vehicles Veterans most frequently drive—minivans, trucks and sport utility vehicles.

Mandatory costs to the Readjustment Benefits account are estimated to be \$8.5 million in 2024, \$62.3 million over 5 years, and \$132.7 million over 10 years. No discretionary costs are associated.

H.R. 2830 Veteran Improvement Commercial Driver License Act of 2023

This bill would amend 38 U.S.C. § 3680A(e) to modify the rules for approval of commercial driver education programs. Currently, under section 3680A(e)(2), the Secretary may not approve the enrollment of an eligible Veteran in a course not leading to a standard college degree offered by a for-profit or non-profit educational institution if the course is offered at a branch of the educational institution and the branch has been operating for less than 2 years. The bill would exempt a commercial driver education program from this limitation if the commercial driver education program for a branch of an educational institution is appropriately licensed and uses the same curriculum as a commercial driver education program offered by the educational institution at another location that is approved under 38 U.S.C. Ch. 36 by a State Approving Agency (SAA) or the Secretary when acting in the role of an SAA.

To be exempt, the educational institution providing the commercial driver education program offered at a branch would have to submit a report to the Secretary each year that demonstrates that the curriculum at the new branch is the same as the curriculum at the primary location. The report would have to be submitted in accordance with requirements established by the Secretary in consultation with SAAs. VA would have to establish the report requirements not later than 180 days after the date of enactment.

The Secretary could withhold an exemption for any educational institution or branch of an educational institution as the Secretary considers appropriate. In making an exemption determination, the Secretary could consult with the Secretary of Transportation on a provider's performance of a commercial driver program, including the status of the provider within the Training Provider Registry of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration when appropriate.

The amendments made by this bill would apply to commercial driver education programs on and after the date that is 180 days after the date the Secretary establishes the reporting requirements.

VA supports this bill. VA believes permitting approval of a course offered at a branch with less than a 2-year operation period under certain circumstances would provide more training opportunities for Veterans and boost employment in this occupational area, while still maintaining SAA authority and oversight.

No mandatory or discretionary costs are associated with this bill.

H.R. 3601 Student Veteran Work Study Modernization Act

This bill would establish a 5-year pilot program to expand eligibility for the work-study allowance under 38 U.S.C. § 3485 to Veterans participating in a rehabilitation program or education program at a half-time training rate or more. The bill would require the VA to provide a report 180 days after the enactment of the bill (and then annually thereafter) to Congress regarding Veterans who participate in work-study. The report would have to include information regarding the number of participating Veterans, the percentage of Veterans who obtain a 4-year degree and the number of Veterans who obtain full-time work at VA. The bill would be subject to the statutory Pay-As-You-Go Act of 2010 and must show how the bill would affect mandatory spending and revenues.

VA would support the bill, if amended, and subject to the availability of appropriations. VA recommends, in lieu of a 5-year pilot program, Congress amend 38 U.S.C. § 3485 to permanently allow for Veterans in a rehabilitation program or education program participating at a rate equal to at least half-time of that required of a full-time student to participate in the work-study program.

Mandatory costs to the Readjustment Benefits account are estimated to be \$3.2 million in 2024, \$19.6 million over five years, and \$19.6 million over 10 years. VA anticipates discretionary costs for H.R. 3601; but, due to the comprehensive nature of this bill, a complete analysis could not be completed, and additional time is needed to provide an accurate cost estimate.

H.R. 3722 Amendment in the Nature of a Substitute to Daniel J. Harvey, Jr. and Adam Lambert Improving Servicemember Transition to Reduce Veteran Suicide Act

Section 2(a) of this bill would amend 10 U.S.C. § 1142(b) and require the Department of Defense (DoD) to cover the following mental health information during pre-separation counseling:

- (1) The availability of mental health services furnished by the appropriate branch of service, DoD, VA or a non-profit entity;
- (2) The treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, anxiety disorders, depression, chronic pain, sleep disorders, suicidal ideation or other mental health conditions associated with military service;
- (3) The risk of suicide, including signs, symptoms and risk factors (including adverse childhood experiences, depression, bipolar disorder, homelessness, unemployment and relationship strain);
- (4) The availability of treatment options and resources to address substance abuse, including alcohol, prescription drug and opioid abuse;
- (5) The potential effects of the loss of community and support systems experienced by a member separating from the Armed Forces;
- (6) Isolation from family, friends or society; and
- (7) The potential stressors associated with separation from the Armed Forces.

Section 2(b) would amend 38 U.S.C. § 6320(b)(1) by requiring the VA Solid Start (VASS) program to assist eligible Veterans who elect to enroll in the patient enrollment system and to educate Veterans about mental health and counseling services available through Veterans Health Administration (VHA). Section 2(c) would require DoD and VA to jointly submit a report to Congress on the information and materials developed pursuant to the amendments made by this bill.

VA would support section 2 of this bill, if amended. Collaboratively, VA and DoD use several programs to provide benefits and services aimed to help reduce or eliminate risk factors associated with suicide while increasing protective factors for Veterans. VA could work with DoD to provide the information outlined under section 2(a) through the interagency governance structure for the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). VA supports section 2(a).

With regards to section 2(b), VA has concerns the bill may restrict the intent of the VASS program. Under current 38 U.S.C. § 6320, VASS employees conduct individualized conversations truly tailored to the unique situation and needs of recently separated Service members to increase awareness and use of VA benefits and services.

The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) launched VASS in December 2019 to provide support for recently separated Veterans. Through VASS, VA provides early and consistent caring contact to newly separated Veterans at least three times during their critical first year of transition from the military at 0–90, 91–180 and 181–365 days post-discharge from active duty. During these calls, specially trained VA representatives address issues or challenges the Veteran identifies and assist them access benefits, services, health care (including mental health care), education and employment opportunities. After each successful connection, the VASS representative provides the Veteran a comprehensive follow-up email that provides information on all issues discussed and lists connections for additional support and assistance. This email specifically provides contact information for service organizations and connections to state Veteran resources, based on information provided by the Veteran regarding where they currently or intend to reside. For fiscal year (FY) 2023, VASS successfully connected with 197,615 (72.1 percent) eligible Veterans. VASS also provides priority contact to individuals meeting certain risk factors during the last year of active duty, supporting a successful transition to VA mental health care treatment.

VASS representatives receive special training to identify recently separated Service members who may be at-risk, and procedures are in place to facilitate an immediate warm transfer to the Veterans Crisis Line, when appropriate. VASS ensures all Veterans are given resources and assistance for the full array of VA benefits and services based on their personalized VASS interview. Additionally, VASS employees currently assist eligible Veterans with VHA enrollment when desired by the Veteran and provide information about mental health care and counseling services when driven by the Veteran's needs. Having the current section 2(b) language mandated in statute would curtail the flexibility for individualized conversations.

VA feels adding new section 6320(b)(1)(G) and (b)(1)(H) would be unnecessary as they are duplicative of the work already done under the VASS program, as summarized above. Further, new subparagraph (H) would require the VASS program to provide this information to all VASS-eligible individuals, regardless of their interest in the service, which would undermine program goals of a personalized VASS experience tailored to the unique needs of the Veteran. VA would be required to allocate resources to allow for the extended time it would take to discuss these services with each VASS-eligible individual, which could negatively impact the overall program's successful connection rate. VA would need funding to support the implementation

and maintenance of this bill. For these reasons, VA recommends removal of section 2(b) from the bill.

No mandatory costs are associated with this bill. No discretionary costs are associated with this proposed legislation, if requested amendments are made.

H.R. 3738 Establishment of Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration

Section 1 of this bill would create a new 38 U.S.C. Ch. 80 and establish within VA a new Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration (VEOTA) with the function of administering VA programs that provide assistance related to economic opportunity to Veterans and their dependents and survivors.

Under proposed 38 U.S.C. § 8002, VEOTA would be responsible for administering the following VA programs:

- (1) Vocational rehabilitation and employment programs;
- (2) Educational assistance programs;
- (3) Veterans' housing loan and related programs;
- (4) Verification of small businesses owned and controlled by Veterans pursuant to 38 U.S.C. § 8127(f), including the administration of the data base of Veteran-owned businesses;
- (5) the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) under 10 U.S.C. § 1144; and
- (6) Any other VA program the Secretary determines appropriate.

Under proposed 38 U.S.C. § 8003, the Secretary would be required to provide an annual report to Congress regarding program-related data from the fiscal year covered by the report. The effective date for implementation would be October 1, 2024. For FY 2024 and FY 2025, the total number of full-time equivalent employees authorized for VBA and VEOTA would not be able to exceed (1) 34,228 in FY 2024 and (2) 35,417 in FY 2025. Any labor rights, inclusion in the bargaining unit and collective bargaining agreement that would affect a VA employee who is transferred to VEOTA would apply in the same manner to such employee after the transfer.

Section 2 of the bill would establish the position of the Under Secretary for Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition, outline the Under Secretary's responsibilities and establish the procedures under which the position would be filled.

Section 3 of the bill would require VA to report to Congress, within 180 days of the date of enactment, on the progress toward establishing VEOTA and prevent the transfer of functions to VEOTA until VA certifies to Congress that the transition of services to VEOTA will not negatively affect the services provided and that services are ready to be transferred.

VA does not support this bill. VA appreciates Congress' focus on improving services and resources offered by these programs; however, VBA's current structure appropriately reflects the Under Secretary for Benefits' overall responsibility for Veterans benefits programs that include those related to economic opportunity and transition, as well as compensation, pension, survivors' benefits and insurance.

We recommend removing proposed section 8002(4), which would move the Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization's (OSDBU) Center for Verification and Evaluation (CVE) program to the new administration. OSDBU currently reports directly to the Deputy Secretary. OSDBU's mission is to advocate for the maximum practicable participation of small, small-disadvantaged, Veteran-owned, women-owned and empowerment-zone businesses in contracts VA awards and in sub-contracts VA's prime contractors award.

This bill would move the CVE program which, according to this bill, administers the verification program required for Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Businesses and Veteran-Owned Small Businesses and maintains the vendor information page data base, to the new administration. However, the verification program is no longer with VA and was transferred to the Small Business Administration as of January 2023 by the FY 2021 National Defense Authorization Act, and 38 U.S.C. § 8127(f) is now obsolete.

VBA's portfolio of benefits is thriving. The Education, Loan Guaranty, Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) and Outreach, Transition and Economic Development (OTED) programs are part of an integrated suite of interdependent services and benefits that also includes compensation, pension and insurance programs. Together, they form a suite of benefit-related resources that Veterans can rely on.

In FY 2022, VA processed over 3.5 million education claims in an average of 6.7 days. Over 1.3 million claims were automated, delivering real-time benefit decisions to Veterans and their dependents. VA paid over \$9.9 billion in education benefits for 834,460 Veterans and their beneficiaries. VA guaranteed 746,091 loans worth \$256.6 billion in FY 2022. Loan Guaranty also assisted 205,702 borrowers retain

homeownership and/or avoid foreclosure, resulting in a \$3.99 billion savings in estimated foreclosure costs to the government. VR&E helps Service members and Veterans with service-connected disabilities and a barrier to employment prepare for, find and maintain suitable jobs through counseling and case management. There were over 124,400 VR&E participants in FY 2022, with more than 30,500 new plans developed to assist Veterans and over 11,800 Veteran rehabilitations.

For those Service members transitioning out of the military, OTED offered additional focus on helping them move more effectively into civilian life, both socially and economically. VA's commitment to support Service members' transition from the military is shown through the VASS program, as discussed above. Since the launch in December 2019 through September 2023, VASS has successfully connected with 398,081 recently separated Veterans, representing a 70.7 percent successful contact rate. This includes a total of 197,615 successful contacts in FY 2023.

Additionally, VA continues to partner with DoD to ensure that separating Service members are focused on their transition as early as possible and begin civilian life on the right foot.

To support the adjudication and delivery of Veteran-and Service member-earned benefits, VBA also has many enabling staff offices, such as finance, Human Resources (HR), facilities, production optimization, outreach and engagement, field operations, business process integration, strategic program management, performance analyses, communications and executive review. These enabling organizations would have to be recreated within the new administration to effectively operate, requiring additional executive leadership and replicated structures. Adding another administration would increase the leadership oversight for programs that are currently in place, contrary to the modernization efforts that are underway.

With respect to section 2 of the bill, the procedure for filling the position of the VEOTA Under Secretary is the same as filling the positions of the Under Secretary for Benefits, the Under Secretary for Health and the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs. Should this bill establishing VEOTA be enacted, VA agrees this should be the procedure for selecting the new VEOTA Under Secretary. However, we note that proposed new section 306A(c) would require VA to create a commission to recommend individuals to the President for appointment to the new Under Secretary position and would establish membership requirements and the function of the commission, which would implicate Chapter 10 of Title 5, U.S. Code (commonly known as the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA)). Therefore, unless Congress specifically exempts the commission from compliance with FACA in the statute, a new VA federal advisory committee would have to be established to carry out the provision.

Additionally, should this bill establishing VEOTA be enacted, VA would need ample time to plan for this considerable transition. Therefore, while VA remains committed to communicating closely with the Committees, it does not support a specified timeframe for reporting or certification.

VA anticipates discretionary General Operating Expense costs would result from enacting this bill for Management Direction and Support for enabling staff offices (aforementioned finance, HR, facilities, outreach and engagement, field operations, business process integration, strategic program management, performance analyses, communications and executive review), which would include payroll and non-pay costs (travel, contract support, centralized payments, etc.). Due to the comprehensive nature of this bill, a complete analysis could not be completed, and additional time is needed to provide an accurate cost estimate. No mandatory costs would be associated with the bill. While no benefit costs are associated with the bill, the appropriation language for the Readjustment Benefits account and the Credit Reform account would have to change to reflect the title of the new administration.

H.R. 3816 Veterans' Entry to Apprenticeship Act

This bill would create a new 38 U.S.C. § 3687A to authorize VA to treat a pre-apprenticeship program in the same manner as an apprenticeship program for the purpose of providing educational assistance. A pre-apprenticeship program would mean a program or set of objectives designed to prepare individuals to enter and succeed in a registered apprenticeship program that has a documented partnership with at least one sponsor. A pre-apprenticeship program would be covered under the bill if the curriculum of the program is approved by a sponsor and the sponsor certifies to VA that the program will prepare an individual with the skills and competencies needed to enroll in a registered apprenticeship program. The program would also have to maintain conduct and attendance policies in accordance with a sponsor. For purposes of this bill, a sponsor would mean an entity that formally supports the pre-apprenticeship program, including a registered apprenticeship program; a department or agency of a state or local government; an institution of high-

er learning; or any other public, private or non-profit entity that the Secretary determines to be a sponsor for purposes of this section.

An individual would be entitled to educational assistance under this provision if they are entitled to educational assistance under 38 U.S.C. Ch. 30, 32, 33, 34 or 35 or 10 U.S.C. Ch. 1606 and are seeking to use their educational assistance for a program of apprenticeship. A covered individual enrolled in a pre-apprenticeship program would receive educational assistance equal to the amount received by an individual in an apprenticeship program. However, if the covered individual is not paid as part of the pre-apprenticeship program, the individual under chapter 33 of title 38 would still receive a monthly housing allowance (MHA). The MHA would be equal to the monthly amount of the basic allowance for housing payable under 37 U.S.C. § 403 for a member with dependents in pay grade E-5 residing in the military housing area that encompasses all or the majority portion of the ZIP Code area of the pre-apprenticeship program. The covered individual's entitlement would be charged at a rate equal to the rate charged for an apprenticeship program. The bill would apply to an individual who enrolls in a program of pre-apprenticeship beginning on or after the date of enactment of this bill.

VA understands the intent of the proposed legislation, but does not support this bill.

Mandatory costs to the Readjustment Benefits account are estimated to be \$11.9 million in 2024, \$65.4 million over five years, and \$144.4 million over 10 years. No VBA administrative costs are associated with this bill. VA estimates the information technology costs associated with the enactment of this legislation to be \$5 million, which includes the design, code development, testing, and deployment of the new functionality in existing information technology systems. VA would need to make changes to the functionality in the Digital GI Bill to include pre-apprenticeship programs. VA estimates that it would require 6 months from the date of enactment to make the necessary information technology changes.

VA is concerned that putting pre-apprenticeship programs on a level playing field with Registered Apprenticeship (RA) programs for purposes of GI bill benefits receipt will lead to poorer outcomes for Veterans. The definitional parameters and safeguards of pre-apprenticeship programs are extremely limited as compared to RA, and we know that many individuals exit pre-apprenticeship programs with little-improved labor market prospects. Opening up GI Bill benefits to this class of programs may lead Veterans to waste precious GI Bill benefits on low-quality programs.

VA has concerns that SAA approval of pre-apprenticeship programs will not serve as a significant quality assurance mechanism. Pre-apprenticeship programs are wholly unregulated in the United States and even DOL itself does not have outcome information on the vast majority of pre-apprenticeship programs. It is challenging to imagine SAAs bringing order and quality assurance to this system, even with the most well-intentioned, well-designed approval process.

H.R. 5190 Military Family Protection from Debt Act

This bill would amend section 207 of the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act (50 U.S.C. § 3937) to expand certain protections to dependents of members of the Armed Forces.

VA defers to DoD and DOJ.

H.R. 5913 Consolidating Veteran Employment Services for Improved Performance Act of 2023

Section 2 of this bill would transfer the Department of Labor's (DOL) Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) and its programs to VA effective October 1, 2025. The functions that would be transferred would include job counseling, training and placement services for Veterans under 38 U.S.C. Ch. 41; Federal Government employment services under 38 U.S.C. § 4214; administration of employment and reemployment rights under 38 U.S.C. Ch. 43; homeless Veterans reintegration programs under 38 U.S.C. Ch. 20; and employment and Veterans benefits training under TAP (10 U.S.C. § 1144). The transfer would include all personnel, assets, liabilities, grants, contracts, property, records and funding pertaining to those programs.

The bill would also require VA to enter into a memorandum of agreement with DOL and with states, as VA determines necessary, to implement the transition of the DOL programs to VA. The bill would also establish that, in FY 2027 and for each subsequent fiscal year, the President would include, in the President's budget request for VA, funding for the transferred functions.

Section 3 of the bill would establish a Deputy Under Secretary for Veterans' Employment and Training. Furthermore, section 4 of the bill would require states to

employ and assign full-time and part-time Veteran employment specialists in state agencies to carry out employment, training and placement services. The bill would also place maximum emphasis on assisting economically or educationally disadvantaged Veterans.

VA strongly opposes the bill. DOL works with VA to provide individualized career counseling and training related to eligible Veterans with service-connected disabilities and help employers fill their workforce needs with employment-seeking Veterans. Through DOL programs, Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program specialists provide services to eligible Veterans experiencing significant barriers to employment.

The bill would also amend VA's prioritization of services. Currently, to the maximum extent possible, VA prioritizes meeting the needs of Veterans with disabilities and Veterans who served on active duty during a war or in a campaign or expedition for which a campaign badge had been authorized. However, the bill would emphasize assisting economically or educationally disadvantaged Veterans. While Veterans with disabilities may fall into this category, VA's priority should remain serving Veterans with disabilities. Veterans with disabilities continue to encounter obstacles in obtaining and maintaining suitable employment and often need more intensive services to meet their employment goal. Therefore, removing this prioritization would harm Veterans with disabilities.

The bill would align employment and Veterans benefits training under VA's TAP. VA disagrees with this as it would remove subject-matters experts from DOL involved with administering a program outside of VA's scope. This would be harmful to Veterans and limit the resources to which they would have access in seeking employment and training. Further, VA's curriculum is designed as a one-day course, focused on VA benefits and services. Adding additional material from DOL would cause program degradation and integrity issues.

The bill would also effectively change the title of Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program to Veteran Employment specialists, which appears to be more suited to the change in the prioritization of services, as reflected in the bill. However, VA notes concerns over the implications to pay and compensation for these specialists as well as the lack of uniform qualifications standards for these positions. The bill would also require VA to ensure that the Veteran employment specialists are properly trained, meaning VA would need to develop a certification program for the state employees and monitor proficiency. Consideration should be given to converting these specialists from state agency employees to VA employees, similar to the Veteran employment specialists in VA's VR&E program.

VA also has concerns regarding the reorganization and realignment implications with transferring the personnel from DOL to VA. VA would need to consider whether internal offices and administrations need to be reorganized to clearly delineate the responsibilities where similar or complementary roles may be impacted by the transfer of functions, such as between VBA and VA's Office of Human Resources and Administration/Operations, Security and Preparedness (HRA/OSP). HRA/OSP includes the Office of Veteran and Military Spouse Engagement Program (under the Office of the Chief Human Capital Officer) and oversees policy and other functions related to the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights (USERRA) functions under 38 U.S.C. Ch. 43. Any internal reorganization and realignment would need additional time, funding and resources to execute.

Related to the reorganization and realignment concerns, VA has concerns with the new position of the VEOTA Deputy Under Secretary. Further clarification is needed as to where the position would sit in VA and regarding appointment requirements for the position. One issue to highlight is that the position is assigned to address Departmental policies and procedures, which would include USERRA under chapter 43 and Federal Government employment services under 38 U.S.C. § 4214. Those specific functions touch on personnel management, which are functions specifically assigned to an Assistant Secretary (A/S) to oversee under 38 U.S.C. § 308. Currently, those functions are assigned to the A/S of HRA/OSP. The bill may create a conflict in duties between the Deputy Under Secretary position and the A/S of HRA/OSP.

The bill would transfer the administration of these and other services from DOL to VA effective October 1, 2025. However, the bill would not authorize funding for VA to administer this program until FY 2027. The lack of funding may cause delays in providing individualized career and training services to eligible Veterans. Given the national implications and magnitude of the changes outlined, VA would need additional time to fully examine the impact and scale of preparation that would be required for VA to implement the transfer of the functions identified.

We understand that DOL opposes this bill, as discussed in its testimony.

H.R. XXXX Improve the Processes to Approve Programs of Education

Section 1(a) of the bill would amend 38 U.S.C. § 3679(f)(1)(A) to add “to the maximum extent practicable” to the requirement that schools provide an individual with a form that contains certain personalized financial information prior to enrolling the individual in a course of education. Section 1(b) would amend 38 U.S.C. § 3680A(a)(4)(B)(iii) to allow for the approval of an independent study program that leads to a certificate for a course of study offered by an institution of higher education described in section 102 of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. § 1002) that is qualified to participate in the student financial assistance programs authorized by Title IV of that Act, including a community college, proprietary school and any other institution of higher education that is eligible to participate in Federal student financial aid programs. Section 1(c) would require VA to establish a website that is updated regularly and serves as a central location for publishing information about the training VA provides for School Certifying Officials (SCO).

VA does not support the bill. VA does not support section 1(a) of the bill. Currently, schools are allowed to use the College Financing Plan available through the Department of Education to satisfy the requirements to provide students with certain financial information. VA believes schools should be required to provide an individual with a form that contains certain personalized financial information prior to enrolling the individual in a course of education.

While VA has no objections to the proposed changes in section 1(b) of the bill, VA believes this section is unnecessary. Currently, VA has the authority to approve independent study programs offered by proprietary institutions of higher education as these programs are described in 38 U.S.C. § 3680A(a)(4)(B)(ii).

While VA has no objection to section 1(c) of the bill, VA believes this section is unnecessary because VA currently has a website that provides information about the training VA provides to SCOs. On the GI Bill website, VA has established and provides a one-stop shop for SCOs and school administrators at <https://www.va.gov/school-administrators/>. The webpage includes training and guides, upcoming events, policies and procedures and resources to support students. Moreover, the webpage provides a direct link to VBA Education Service’s current and previous webinars and training at https://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/resources/education_resources/school_certifying_officials/presentations.asp. On this page, SCOs can review topics that will be discussed in future Office Hours and review previous webinars.

VA has not completed its cost estimate for this bill.

H.R. 5702 Expanding Access for Online Veteran Students Act

The bill would amend 38 U.S.C. § 3313(c)(1)(B) to establish an amount payable for the MHA under the Post-9/11 GI Bill for an individual pursuing a program of education solely through distance learning that is shorter than 12 weeks during the summer. Under the bill, such an individual would receive the national average of the MHA payable under the Post-9/11 GI Bill. The amendments would apply to a program of education beginning on or after August 1, 2024.

VA would support this bill, if amended, and subject to the availability of appropriations. VA recommends increasing the amount payable for the MHA to the national average for all individuals enrolled in a program of education solely through distance learning under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, not just individuals enrolled in a program shorter than 12 weeks during the summer. This bill would create a disparity between participants of the chapter 31 VR&E program who are eligible for the Post-9/11 GI Bill rate and participants in the chapter 33 Post-9/11 GI Bill program. While many chapter 31 participants are eligible for the Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit, many seek services from chapter 31 due to their service-connected disabilities. A Veteran with a service-connected disability should not be placed at a disadvantage simply by choosing to participate in another VA education benefit.

Additionally, VA does not have a definition for “summer programs.” However, there is a regulatory definition for “summer term” and “summer session.” These definitions are found at 38 C.F.R. § 21.4200(b)(5) and (6), which defines “summer term” as “the whole of the period of instruction at a school which takes place between ordinary school years” that “may be divided into several summer sessions” and defines “summer session” as “any division of a summer term.” This definition is limited as it is only applicable to schools that operate on a traditional semester-based schedule. It could not be applied to non-traditional term-based programs, for example, programs with 8-week terms and term start dates throughout the year. It is unclear how Congress wishes to address educational institutions that are organized on a year-round enrollment (or rolling admission) basis and do not have distinct summer terms. Therefore, VA recommends adding a distinct definition for the term “summer programs” in the bill. Since VA is uncertain regarding Congress’ in-

tent and desired outcome with this proposed legislation, we would be glad to meet with the appropriate staffers regarding the intent of the bill and to assist with refining the bill's language to include terms that would clarify establishing a monthly housing stipend under the Post-9/11 GI Bill for individuals who pursue summer programs of education solely through distance learning.

Last, VA would need to make modifications to its existing IT systems to implement this legislation. Specifically, VA would need to implement new rules for the Digital GI Bill platform to pay a different MHA for individuals pursuing a program of education, solely through distance learning, that is shorter than 12 weeks during the summer.

Mandatory costs to the Readjustment Benefits account are estimated to be \$96.9 million in 2024, \$1.5 billion over five years, and \$3.5 billion over 10 years. No VBA administrative costs are associated with this bill. VA estimates the information technology costs associated with the enactment of this legislation to be \$5 million, which includes the design, code development, testing, and deployment of the new functionality in existing information technology systems. VA would need to make changes to the functionality in the Digital GI Bill to pay a different MHA for individuals pursuing a program of education, solely through distance learning, that is shorter than 12 weeks during the summer. VA estimates that it would require 6 months from the date of enactment to make the necessary information technology changes.

H.R. 5785 Modifications to Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship

This bill would amend 38 U.S.C. § 3320(b) by removing the requirement that an individual must have used all of his or her educational assistance under the Post-9/11 GI Bill or, based on the individual's rate of usage, will use all educational assistance within 180 days of applying for benefits under the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Scholarship. The bill would further amend section 3320(b) to authorize the STEM Scholarship for graduate degree programs and change the number of credit hours that must be completed from 60 to 45 semester hours and from 90 to 67.5 quarter hours.

This bill would also amend the payment priority in section 3320(c)(1) in which the STEM Scholarship can be awarded when VA determines there are insufficient funds available to provide additional benefits to all eligible individuals. Individuals who have used the highest number of months of chapter 33 educational assistance and individuals who are using their chapter 33 entitlement to pursue a program of post-secondary education and who have declared a major would receive priority under the bill.

Finally, the bill would amend section 3320(d) to specify that an individual who receives a benefit under this section may use such benefit only after the individual has used all the educational assistance to which the individual is entitled under the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

VA would support the bill, if amended, and subject to the availability of appropriations. The bill would amend 38 U.S.C. § 3320(c) to change how VA prioritizes and selects individuals who can receive additional funds. However, it is unclear how the dual prioritization in section 3320(c)(1) and (2) should work. Therefore, VA recommends Congress clarify how VA should determine the appropriate STEM beneficiaries based on the dual priorities.

Additionally, since the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship's additional 9 months are available only while enrolled in a STEM program, it is unclear what should happen if a student changes to a non-STEM program and the scholarship is revoked.

Mandatory costs to the Readjustment Benefits account are estimated to be \$112.1 million in 2024, \$328.7 million over five years, and \$432.7 million over 10 years.

H.R. XXXX Waiver of VA-Guaranteed Housing Loan Fee for a Veteran with a Service-Connected Disability

This bill would amend 38 U.S.C. § 3729(c)(2)(A) to waive the loan fee for a Veteran obtaining a VA-guaranteed loan, based on the date of the Veteran's pre-discharge medical examination, rather than on the date of a rating or memorandum rating for disability compensation. VA supports improving the way those transitioning from active duty receive a loan fee waiver but has significant concerns with the approach taken in this bill. VA is concerned it could result in a complex, back-end refund process that would be confusing for Veterans, Service members, lenders and VA employees, and that the bill could lead to an unsustainable financial position.

VA would support this bill if amended and provided Congress identifies the necessary cost offsets. Section 1(a) of the bill would establish an earlier point

in time for a Veteran to be treated as receiving VA compensation, for home loan purposes. We note that, in effect, this provision applies to Service members who are considered Veterans under 38 U.S.C. § 3701 or § 3702. Where current section 3729(c)(2) requires VA to treat a Veteran as receiving compensation as of the date of a pre-discharge rating or a pre-discharge memorandum rating, section 1(a) of the bill would change the criterion to the date of the medical examination or review that leads to the rating or memorandum rating.

The earlier-in-time measure would save disabled Veterans thousands of dollars and prevent delays in closings, as some disabled Veterans attempt to postpone using their benefits until after they receive their rating, solely to avoid having to pay the loan fee. This is because, in general, a Veteran must be receiving compensation to qualify for a loan fee waiver under section 3729. The loan fee prescribed by section 3729 is the fee collected from each person obtaining a housing loan guaranteed, insured or made by VA. VA cannot guarantee, insure or make a loan until the loan fee has been remitted to the Secretary unless a waiver, as described in subsection (c), applies. Although this bill would not always prevent the need to collect the loan fee at the closing, it would ensure those Veterans who obtain a medical examination or review prior to closing, and are subsequently rated as eligible for compensation, would have their loan fee refunded.

Section 1(b) of the bill would expand the new criteria to apply retroactively. VA would be required to issue refunds to any Veteran who would have been eligible for a waiver of the loan fee had the new legislation been in effect at the time of their loan closing.

Although VA supports loan fee waivers for disabled Veterans who close on their loans before receiving their rating, VA is concerned with the continued expansion of waivers of the loan fee. Part of VA's commitment to ensuring all eligible Veterans can use their guaranteed home loan benefits is ensuring continued fiscal soundness of the program, which relies, in large part, on the statutory loan fee to help offset guaranty claims. This fee, which was designed to spread program risk across the portfolio, helps to lower the taxpayer cost of the guaranty, since VA's home loan program does not require down payments or monthly mortgage insurance.

VA has seen a steady rise in Veterans who are exempt from paying the statutory fee: from 32 percent in 2013 to 55 percent in 2023. VA has also seen an annual increase in the number of active-duty Service members filing pre-discharge claims under the Benefits Delivery at Discharge program over the past 4 years. Following enactment of the Blue Water Navy Act of 2019, VA saw an average annual increase of 2.4 percentage points. VA anticipates further increases related to the Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act of 2022. As the percentage of waivers increases, the program's ability to cover the Federal Government's loan guaranty commitments without taxpayer funding could be in jeopardy. VA is concerned that, over time, the number of individuals exempt from paying the loan fee will inch closer to 100 percent.

Additionally, VA is concerned about the use of experienced, senior-level staff likely needed to process these refunds, particularly if section 1(b) of the bill is enacted as drafted. Although VA is accustomed to processing loan fee refunds for retroactive disability compensation awards, this bill would introduce a more complex loan refund review process than applied in cases today. Under this bill, VA employees would be required to analyze a Service member's pre-discharge claims, pre-discharge disability examinations, pre-discharge evidentiary reviews and eventual disability rating decisions to determine the earliest possible date for purposes of a loan fee waiver. Redirecting senior-level resources could have cascading impacts on other mission-critical work, such as efforts to modernize technology systems to improve the guaranteed home loan process for Veterans, employees, lenders and other program participants.

As noted above, VA supports an improved experience for Service members looking to use their home loan benefit prior to discharge. Therefore, VA looks forward to working with this Committee to craft a legislative solution that would not result in a complex, resource-intensive refund process or, over time, a potentially untenable financial position for VA's guaranteed home loan program. Unfortunately, given the complexity of this issue, and the short timeframe VA was given to provide its views and costing, we cannot, at this time, provide specific legislative language that we would support.

Mandatory benefit loan subsidy costs are estimated to be \$5.2 million in 2024, \$31.7 million over five years, and \$87.5 million over 10 years. Discretionary General Operating Expense costs are estimated to be \$144,000 in 2024, \$715,000 over five years, and \$1.5 million over 10 years.

Conclusion

This concludes my statement. We would be happy to answer any questions you or other members of the Subcommittee may have.

Prepared Statement of Margarita Devlin

Introduction

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's legislative hearing.

The mission of the Department of Labor (DOL or Department), Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS), is to prepare America's veterans, service members, and military spouses for meaningful careers, provide them with employment resources and expertise, protect their employment rights, and promote their employment opportunities. It is my honor to serve as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Operations and Management of DOL VETS.

H.R. 5913, the Consolidating Veteran Employment Services for Improved Performance Act of 2023

This bill would transfer the VETS agency from DOL to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and would likewise transfer the administration of Jobs for Veterans State Grants¹ (JVSG), the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program² (HVRP), the employment-related portions of the Transition Assistance Program³ (TAP), and DOL's Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act⁴ (USERRA) enforcement responsibilities, and other related responsibilities and obligations provided under the authorizing legislation for those programs.

DOL strongly opposes this bill. DOL is the lead Federal Department for employment, training, and worker protection programs, with extensive resources and institutional expertise in those services, which cannot be replicated elsewhere. With that in mind, VETS can best accomplish its mission housed within the Department that oversees the American workforce system. In fact, the current structure has enabled VETS' programs to be highly successful, with positive performance outcomes that support employment services for transitioning servicemembers, veterans, and military spouses. There is no evidence that moving VETS to VA would improve the efficiency or effectiveness of our programs. On the contrary, it would be extremely disruptive to our programs and the people we serve.

DOL is the Federal Lead for Employment, Training, and Worker Protection

For over 100 years, the charter mission of the DOL has been to "foster, promote and develop the welfare of working people, to improve their working conditions, and to enhance their opportunities for profitable employment." DOL's *Good Jobs Initiative* promotes family sustaining wages, jobs with benefits, safe and inclusive workplaces, worker growth and empowerment. Following these guidelines, VETS prepares veterans and military spouses for careers that they deserve and promotes employers that recognize the value that veterans and military spouses bring to the workplace. The Department's collective resources and expertise are integrated with state workforce agencies and local communities to meet the employment and training needs of service members, veterans, and their families. By collaborating with our DOL sister agencies, across our programs, VETS successfully serves over 440,000 veterans, service members, and military spouses each year.

DOL's Employment and Training Administration (ETA) administers the public workforce system, which includes nearly 2,300 American Job Centers across the country. These one-stop locations offer a broad range of career and wrap-around supportive services to the public, such as job training programs, employment services, adult basic education and literacy, vocational rehabilitation for individuals with disabilities, Registered Apprenticeships, childcare, transportation assistance, housing assistance, legal aid services, unemployment compensation (including the Unemployment Compensation for ex-service members (UCX) program), and other services. In most states, American Job Centers also host eligibility determination services for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and other partner programs.

¹ Authorized under 38 U.S.C. Chapter 41.

² Authorized under 38 U.S.C. 2021, 2021A and 2023.

³ Authorized under 10 U.S.C. 1144.

⁴ Authorized under 38 U.S.C. Chapter 43.

The VETS-administered JVSG program provides funding for dedicated staff who work in the American Job Centers to provide individualized career and training-related services to veterans and eligible persons with significant barriers to employment and to assist employers to fill their workforce needs with job-seeking veterans. As part of TAP, transitioning service members who are unable to meet employment-related Career Readiness Standards are provided a “warm handover” to an American Job Center, a person-to-person connection between the transitioning service member and an American Job Center, which connects them with services and follow-up resources as needed. Veterans and their eligible spouses receive priority of service for all workforce training programs funded in whole or in part by DOL, including the comprehensive wrap-around services listed above, as established by the Jobs for Veterans Act of 2002 (38 U.S.C. 4215).

VETS also strongly relies on the expertise of DOL staff employed throughout the Department. DOL is one of the largest and most experienced grant-making departments within the Federal government, and our Grant Officers are a part of ETA’s Office of Grants Management (OGM). VETS also utilizes OGM to manage the grant application process and staff for HVRP. DOL has specialized expertise in workforce development, job placement, and employment programs for veterans and non-veterans alike. We also have established relationships with employers, workforce development agencies, and educational institutions that are crucial for effective employment services. Moving these functions to VA could disrupt these relationships and the institutional knowledge that has been developed over years. VA also has no experience providing grants to the public workforce system, and lacks the expertise needed to properly monitor and collaborate with stakeholders on those grants. Similarly, removing JVSG and TAP employment services from DOL would create new and unnecessary administrative and logistical barriers for the programs, which are currently an integrated part of the public workforce system.

Our highly specialized USERRA compliance staff similarly work hand-in-hand with staff from DOL’s Office of the Solicitor (SOL). They have a collective, extensive expertise in the nuances of USERRA law and a broad range of other worker protection and employment laws that exists nowhere else within the Federal government.

VETS also collaborates with several other agencies within DOL in support of veterans’ employment. For example, DOL’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) focuses on disability policy and employment services and has a long history of working with VETS and with our military and civilian partners on issues affecting disabled veterans.

DOL’s Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP) is responsible for administering provisions of the Vietnam Era Veterans’ Readjustment Assistance Act of 1974 (VEVRAA). This law prohibits employment discrimination against protected veterans by covered Federal contractors and subcontractors. VEVRAA also requires contractors and their subcontractors to take affirmative action to employ these veterans. As required by 38 U.S.C. 4212, covered Federal contractors and subcontractors are required to report annually on their affirmative action efforts in employing veterans. Working in close collaboration, VETS and OFCCP developed a unique dedicated electronic filing mechanism for receiving the VETS-4212 Reports from Federal contractors, which cannot be removed or transferred as it is part of DOL’s integrated IT system.

DOL’s Wage and Hour Division (WHD) enforces important leave entitlements for veterans and their families through the Military Family Leave provisions of the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). The Military Family Leave provisions were first added to the FMLA in 2008, and revised in 2010, to provide protections specific to the needs of military families.

DOL’s Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) publishes monthly, quarterly, and annual employment data on veterans and, each March, publishes an annual supplemental report called the “Employment Situation of Veterans.” These data points and reports, and our ongoing consultation with the BLS subject-matter experts who produce them, are critical to understanding the veteran employment situation. VETS works with Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), unions, the Advisory Committee for Veteran Employment, Training and Employer Outreach, and other external stakeholders to refine the metrics that BLS utilizes for its surveys of the veteran population. In addition to BLS, the Department’s Chief Evaluation Office sponsors research on the effectiveness and efficiency of veteran employment programs.

DOL’s Women’s Bureau (WB), the only agency of its kind in the federal government, has a longstanding partnership with VETS to provide tailored support to women veterans and military spouses who are women. Approximately 92 percent of

military spouses are women, and they have an unemployment rate of 21 percent⁵ and a 31 percent underemployment rate. Among many other collaborations, the Women's Bureau coordinated with VETS to jointly convene a series of listening sessions across the country to hear directly from the military spouse community and better understand the employment challenges facing them. Following those sessions, WB and VETS worked together to launch a dedicated online portal for military spouses, featuring a range of employment resources including information on transferring occupational licenses.

VETS programs cannot properly function without all of the staff, collaboration, resources, and other support provided by and situated throughout DOL, which cannot be replicated at VA. And, if VETS is moved to VA, then veterans will lose a significant voice within the public workforce system, as there would no longer be an agency within DOL that prioritizes and has the expertise needed to speak on behalf of this community.

VETS Programs Have Highly Successful Performance

I have testified twice⁶ before this Subcommittee about the successes of VETS administration of USERRA. USERRA prohibits discrimination in employment based on an individual's prior service in the uniformed services; current service in the uniformed services; or intent to join the uniformed services. USERRA also guarantees an employee returning from military service or training the right to be reemployed at their former job (or as nearly comparable a job as possible) with the same benefits. There were more than 2 million service members eligible for USERRA protections at the end of July 2023.⁷ This sum included 766,069 members of the Reserve Components (RC) that are comprised of Reserve and National Guard troops and 1,317,051 members of the Active Components of the U.S. Armed Forces, including the Coast Guard.

On average over the past three years, VETS has closed 943 USERRA cases for investigation per year. When VETS investigators find a violation of USERRA, the investigator works diligently with both the claimant and the employer to resolve the case to the satisfaction of both parties. Of cases in which VETS found a violation of USERRA in fiscal year (FY) 2021, VETS resolved 87 percent of those cases, which is the highest resolution rate in the history of the program. VETS does not have a backlog of cases and resolves its cases in a timely fashion. This success speaks to the high level of expertise of the Department's SOL and VETS staff. VETS also conducts a robust public outreach campaign to educate service members, employers, and others on their rights and responsibilities under USERRA. In FY 2023, VETS conducted over 1,327 compliance assistance events nationwide, informing employees and employers alike of their rights and responsibilities under USERRA. The relatively small number of investigations needed each year compared to the large number of service members being protected provide strong evidence that the overwhelming majority of employers voluntarily comply with USERRA when they are aware of the law's requirements, and that our outreach and education efforts have been highly successful.

VETS Deputy Assistant Secretary Margarita Devlin testified before this Subcommittee⁸ about the successes of the VETS TAP employment efforts. VETS has always been an integral member of the TAP interagency partnership, being responsible for the majority of the core TAP curriculum. The TAP interagency partners consist of the Departments of Labor, Defense, Veterans Affairs, Homeland Security, and Education, as well as the military service branches, the Small Business Administration, and the Office of Personnel Management. During the pandemic, VETS was able to pivot within a month to provide instructor-led virtual workshops, making this transition faster than its TAP interagency partners. VETS supported instructor-led DOL TAP workshops for all military service branches across multiple platforms. This speaks to a flexibility that has been a hallmark of VETS' contribution to TAP. In FY 2022, service members and military spouses attended our TAP employment

⁵ <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2021-demographics-report.pdf>

⁶ <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR10/20230309/115444/HHRG-118-VR10-Wstate-RodriguezJ-20230309.pdf> and <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR10/20230614/116100/HHRG-118-VR10-Wstate-RodriguezJ-20230614.pdf>

⁷ Total number of U.S. Armed Forces and Selected Reserves for July, 2023, reported by Department of Defense, Defense Manpower Data Center, in Armed Forces Strength Figures (including Coast Guard) for July 31, 2023, and Selected Reserves by Rank/Grade (including Coast Guard) for July 31, 2023, accessible at <https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports>

⁸ <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR10/20230517/115740/HHRG-118-VR10-Wstate-DevlinM-20230517.pdf>

workshops in record-breaking numbers. TAP employment workshops provided instruction to 266,127 total participants,⁹ which is an over 40 percent increase from the previous workshop record of 188,924 total participants in FY 2021. VETS workshops are highly rated by attendees. The FY 2023 Transition Assistance Participant Assessment results through the second quarter indicated that 97 percent of participants would use what they learned in their own transition planning, and 95 percent reported that our Employment Fundamentals of Career Transition enhanced their confidence in transition planning.

VETS also has a number of innovative TAP pilot initiatives, including the Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot (ENPP), which provides one-on-one career assistance to interested transitioning service members, and their spouses, at select military installations worldwide. ENPP represents a high-touch, customer-centric approach to career transition assistance in which the Employment Navigators guide clients through career exploration and planning. The Employment Navigators provide direct connection to the program's 46 non-governmental partners for continued assistance. These non-governmental partners provide a wide variety of services that include placement services, apprenticeship opportunities, career transition mentorship, and networking opportunities, to name a few. Each of these partners has a Memorandum of Understanding with VETS to ensure a responsive and positive connection with each client referred. ENPP also provides customers who need assistance with a "warm handover" to an American Job Center, which connects them with services and follow-up resources as needed. According to participant surveys, the ENPP has been a great success. As of July 31, 2023, 96 percent of ENPP survey respondents reported positive feelings after meeting with their Employment Navigator and would recommend ENPP to a friend or colleague. And, 98 percent felt ENPP partners met or exceeded their employment-related expectations.

In addition, the Off-Base Transition Training (OBTT) pilot program offers TAP to veterans and the spouses of veterans at locations other than active military installations, to help improve employment-related outcomes in areas with high veteran unemployment. VETS State staff leverage our relationships with local communities to establish classroom locations and reach veterans in need of this service in the pilot states. As of July 31, 2023, 6,170 veterans or spouses of veterans were provided support through 3,304 virtual and in-person workshops through OBTT.

HVRP has also been successful. In FY 2022, HVRP awarded more than \$57 million, funding 159 grantees. More than 61 percent of the over 16,900 veterans experiencing homelessness served in Program Year 2021 were employed when they completed the program with an average hourly wage of \$17.45 at placement. VETS provided grant funding and services to more than 2,100 additional veterans experiencing homelessness from Program Year 2020 to 2021.

Success stories like that of U.S. Marine Corps veteran Chuck Ondo are not uncommon. Ondo, a former State trooper, lost his career to a substance abuse disorder (SUD). After becoming homeless, Ondo enrolled in VETS' HVRP. HVRP helped him obtain his cosmetology license, purchased a set of clippers for him, helped him prepare his resumé, and performed mock interviews. Ondo was soon hired as a Barber/Stylist at \$15 per hour plus commissions and bonuses. Since then, Ondo has opened up his own shop and freely shares his story in hopes of inspiring others. He even helped his church create a support group for veterans and consults with state and local law enforcement agencies about how to effectively combat SUD. This is the power of the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program.

As noted above, JVSG is a critical and integrated component of the public workforce system. In Program Year 2022, nearly 43,000 veterans worked with JVSG staff, and each of them faced significant barriers to employment, such as the 19,000 who identified being low income as one of their barriers. Nearly 475 Local Veterans' Employment Representative (LVER) specialists served almost 147,000 veterans by providing employer outreach activities. Nearly 1,025 Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists served over 43,500 veterans with significant barriers to employment (43,500 veterans served during FY 2022 was a subset of the 147,000). And our most recent data shows that over three quarters of states have met or exceeded their goals for the number of participants served, participants employed, and post-program wages earned.

All newly hired DVOP specialists and LVER staff are required to satisfactorily complete expert training delivered by the VETS-administered National Veterans' Training Institute (NVTI)¹⁰ within 18 months after the date of employment. This helps ensure the quality and consistency of service delivery across the country.

⁹Note that an individual service member may attend more than one workshop. References to the total number of TAP workshop participants do not track individual unique participants.

¹⁰<https://www.nvti.org/>

VETS has worked closely with DOL's ODEP to include training components in the NVTI curriculum to ensure that employment and accommodations for veterans with disabilities are being properly provided.

Moving VETS to VA Would Greatly Disrupt VETS Services

If the "Consolidating Veteran Employment Services for Improved Performance Act of 2023" were enacted, it would cause tremendous and costly disruption to our programs and people we serve. The veteran unemployment rate continues to be historically low, at just 3.6 percent as of August 2023.¹¹ In addition, the data show that all VETS employment and compliance programs are achieving historically high performance outcomes, and those outcomes are a direct result of the knowledge and hard work of DOL employees, and of the processes, IT systems, and relationships that we've built within the Department.

But if this legislation were enacted, the focus and time of DOL leaders and staff, and the resources of our agency, would immediately shift away from our successful institution and toward the herculean task of implementing the transition to VA. Existing IT systems would need to go through costly studies and transfers to new systems at VA. VETS leadership would be tasked with studying and planning how to implement the transfer, developing and implementing an elaborate Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with VA to accomplish it, and addressing all of the other numerous and costly logistical complications that would accompany the actual transfer of activities. Every staff member would need to be re-trained to use VA's internal systems and procedures. And every State and HVRP grantee would likewise need to go through a similar process, as they re-establish receipt and compliance of their grants through VA. I do not see how any of this will improve the performance of our programs or help our Nation's service members, veterans, and military spouses.

Other work conducted by VETS would also be disrupted. For example, we have robust outreach and engagement activities that are helping to connect service members and veterans to employment and training opportunities. VETS has hosted employer, industry sector, and union round tables that highlighted the value of in-service credentials and their importance to civilian employers, and shared DOL resources that help facilitate civilian employment. In FY 2023, VETS' Veteran Employment Outreach program conducted over 2,000 documented employer engagement activities in support of employers to find, hire, and retain veterans. We have also partnered with ETA and the Department of Defense to develop pathways to employment for service members who have completed, or partially completed, the United Services Military Apprenticeship Program (USMAP). We have supported industry sector initiatives to facilitate public-private partnerships that are helping to establish career pathways into high demand careers in trucking, cybersecurity manufacturing, clean energy, defense industrial base, and healthcare industries. VETS has also supported this effort by enhancing its TAP curriculum, creating a new Military Lifecycle apprenticeship training and an Occupational Licensing Guide to help service members and veterans leverage the credentials and licenses earned while in service.

I'd also like to note that Congress has recently moved functions out of the VA to more specialized agencies to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of programs. On January 1, 2021, Congress passed the William H. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 (Public Law 116-283). Section 862 of that law directed the Small Business Administration (SBA) to create a governmentwide certification program for Service Disabled Veteran Owned Small Businesses. SBA will also conduct certifications for Veteran Owned Small Businesses for VA's use. I strongly believe we should continue to build efficiencies in the government by continuing to align resources and staff by functionality instead of by theme.

Further, our programs have been studied by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), DOL's Office of the Inspector General (OIG), and our Chief Evaluation Office. I am not aware of any report or other published evidence that suggests moving VETS or our programs to VA would improve the performance of any of our programs.

Our record of performance speaks for itself. Our achievements are in large part due to our organizational alignment within DOL, and our close partnerships with VA, the Department of Defense, and others. Changes to this approach could have devastating consequences.

¹¹ <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/latest-numbers>

VETS Position on Other Legislation before the Subcommittee

VETS is supportive of the concept of H.R. 3816, the “Veterans’ Entry to Apprenticeship Act,” which is intended “to ensure that veterans may attend pre-apprenticeship programs using certain educational assistance provided by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs,” and welcomes the opportunity to provide technical assistance should this bill move forward.

On all other bills being considered by the Subcommittee today, VETS defers to VA.

Conclusion

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to highlight the important work VETS is doing in support of those who have served our country, and how important it is that VETS remain part of DOL. I am committed to working with you and your dedicated staff in any way that I can to improve our programs.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Prepared Statement of Kristina Keenan

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, 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. 522, Deliver for Veterans Act

The VFW supports this proposal to pay the total expense price for purchasing and shipping a vehicle or other conveyance adapted for operation by disabled individuals who are eligible to receive such benefits. With the recent passage of the *Advancing Uniform Transportation Opportunities (AUTO) for Veterans Act*, the ability for veterans in need of adaptive services to have uninterrupted independence through safe driving without paying astronomical amounts is now possible. However, there is more work to be done for veterans in remote areas such as Guam. In recent years, the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) responded to some of the needs that veterans in Guam were experiencing by standing up a local new amputee clinic that provides prosthetic care. *The Deliver for Veterans Act* would continue this work by amending the existing law to include a provision that would eliminate the undue financial burden, which is estimated to be thousands of dollars, for veterans not located in the vicinity where vehicles can be manufactured without a shipping requirement. The United States did not hesitate to pay the total expenses when purchasing or shipping the vehicles that these veterans needed to operate in battle, and we should not hesitate to pay the same expenses for remotely located veterans to receive the vehicles that are needed for them to operate independently after service.

H.R. 2830, Veteran Improvement Commercial Driver License Act of 2023

The VFW supports this proposal to revise the rules for approval by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs of commercial driver license (CDL) education programs. Our country faces supply chain issues and one of the reasons is a lack of commercial transport drivers. Many CDL programs are offered at for-profit institutions that require different approval requirements for new locations and are identified as “branches.” Not-for-profit schools are allowed to open new campuses and receive approval to utilize VA education benefits as soon as a new location opens. For-profit schools that open new branches have different approval requirements, one of which is a wait time of up to two years for students to utilize VA benefits. These same student veterans are able to immediately use these benefits for the same program at the main institution.

H.R. 3601, Student Veteran Work Study Modernization Act

The VFW supports this proposal, which would allow students using VA education benefits at a rate of at least half-time basis to receive allowances for participating in work-study programs. This proposal represents a need brought to the forefront by one of our own VFW-SVA legislative fellows earlier this year. Many student veterans are only able to attend at a half-time rate as they pursue a degree along with managing other responsibilities. They may also benefit from VA work-study opportunities and have a desire to give back to the veteran community through work associated with VA.

H.R. 3722, Daniel J. Harvey, Jr. and Adam Lambert Improving Servicemember Transition to Reduce Veteran Suicide Act and the Amendment in the Nature of a Substitute to it

Service member and veteran suicide prevention continues to be a top priority for the VFW. Recent research indicates that suicide risk increases after transition from the military. Additional research shows that risk is also heightened in individuals with mental health diagnoses. Accordingly, it is appropriate to educate and support transitioning service members with connections and resources to ensure risk factors are identified and care is given. The VFW supports this legislation that would create a five-year pilot program to educate transitioning service members on reintegrating into civilian life and factors related to suicide risk. This pilot program would also facilitate a warm handoff to VA, which would include an initial appointment, a health assessment, and a tailored treatment plan that addresses medical conditions associated with heightened suicide risk.

We do recommend that Congress ensures the provisions of this legislation occur in a private setting. This would enable transitioning service members to more thoroughly understand the conditions associated with heightened suicide risk, as they may not have pre-existing diagnoses. This type of setting would also ensure a safe, confidential environment to discuss personal, service-related events that could lead to the conditions outlined in this subsection. Furthermore, the VFW also suggests that the Department of Defense ensures appropriate processes and resources are in place to accommodate medical record requests and submissions to VA.

H.R. 3738, To amend title 38, United States Code, to establish in the Department of Veterans Affairs the Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration, and for other purposes

The VFW supports this proposal to establish the Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration in the Department of Veterans Affairs. VA is comprised of three administrations—the National Cemetery Administration (NCA), Veterans Health Administration, and Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). VBA oversees not only compensation and pension, but also the GI Bill, vocational rehabilitation, housing and business loans, and the broadly defined transition assistance program, which is shared with the Departments of Labor, Defense, and Homeland Security.

The VFW believes our Nation's focus on the economic opportunities of our veterans must be permanent. In reality, not all veterans seek VA health care when they are discharged, they do not need assistance from the NCA, and they do not all seek disability compensation. However, the vast majority are looking for gainful employment and/or education. Congress should recognize the value of these programs by separating them into their own administration focused solely on their utilization and growth.

The VFW has long proposed that Congress creates a fourth administration under VA with its own undersecretary whose sole responsibility is the economic opportunity programs. This legislation would permit the new Secretary of Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration to refocus resources, provide a champion for these programs, and create that central point of contact for Veterans Service Organizations and Congress. This would ensure that the GI Bill, Veteran Readiness and Employment, home loan, and other benefits centered on economic opportunity receive the attention they deserve.

H.R. 3816, Veterans' Entry to Apprenticeship Act

The VFW supports this proposal to ensure that veterans may attend pre-apprenticeship programs using certain educational assistance provided by VA. Quality pre-apprenticeship programs can play a valuable role in providing work-based learning to help individuals prepare for an entry-level Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP). While pre-apprenticeship programs have varied designs and approaches, the Department of Labor has outlined the elements that can place an individual on the potential career pathway to employability through a RAP. There has been a sixty-four percent growth in new apprentices in the past ten years and a ninety percent retention rate of apprentices by their employers after completing an apprenticeship. Providing pre-apprenticeship usage for VA benefits would allow veterans to obtain the skills they need to succeed while earning the wages they need to build financial security.

H.R. 5190, Military Family Protection from Debt Act

The VFW supports this legislation to expand certain protections to dependents of members of the armed forces. Financial stressors can inhibit a service members'

ability to effectively focus on the mission while serving. Financial stressors affecting their families can also contribute to unnecessary distractions. This proposal would expand protections for dependents of service members so financial difficulties do not negatively affect service members while they are performing their duties.

H.R. XXXX, Expanding Access for Online Veteran Students Act

The VFW supports this proposal to expand the monthly housing stipend for student veterans who take summer courses online to receive the national monthly amount. Currently, the monthly housing allowance rates for online courses are half of the national average, which is simply not enough for many student veterans. If they take courses during the summer, even online, they should not experience a decrease in their housing benefit that could cause them financial hardship before they have completed a degree program.

While this is a step in the right direction, the VFW would like for student veterans to receive at least the full national average rate for housing allowance even if they are enrolled in a degree program that is conducted online for some or all semesters. Online education has adapted and grown since the COVID-19 pandemic, much like working from home has changed the work model around the country. Student veterans continue to require housing assistance in order to successfully pursue higher education, even when enrolled in online programs.

H.R. XXXX, To amend title 38, United States Code, to improve the processes to approve programs of education for purposes of the educational assistance programs of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes

The VFW supports this proposal to modify the requirement for schools to provide personalized information about costs and financial assistance. The new language “to the maximum extent practicable” would give schools more flexibility without holding them back from receiving VA education funding. The legislation would also create a single VA website for school certifying officials to find current training. This would ensure that up-to-date training is always available even if schools experience staff turnover, or updates sent through email have been lost.

These are both legislative priorities for the VFW as schools have communicated that these changes would help facilitate their efforts to support their student veterans. We suggest adding to Section 1(a) that all policy and guidance updates be included on the VA website for school officials, and that VA be required to update that information in a timely manner as delays in keeping this information current could cause problems.

H.R. XXXX, Consolidating Veteran Employment Services for Improved Performance Act of 2023

Although the VFW understands the goals of this legislation, our organization cannot support moving Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS) from the Department of Labor to the Department of Veterans Affairs at this time. When the committee first introduced this concept more than a decade ago, VETS was in turmoil. However, since the *VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011* (P.L. 112-56), VETS has evolved. Today, VETS successfully leverages business across the Department of Labor to execute its mission, to include the Employment and Training Administration, Office of Federal Contract Compliance, and Office of Disability Employment Policy, among others. Though this legislation seeks to maintain these relationships, the VFW keenly understands that substantive interagency collaboration can be a challenge. Moreover, this proposal would likely present substantial challenges to state workforce agencies that would now report programs to separate entities under the purview of separate federal agencies with separate missions. Should Congress successfully compel VA to establish its fourth administration, the VFW may revisit this concept once this administration is viable and highly functioning.

H.R. XXXX, To amend title 38, United States Code, to modify the requirements of the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship

The VFW supports amending the specific credit hours language for the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship, and including the ability to utilize this benefit for graduate degrees in STEM fields. The VFW supported the extension of entitlements for STEM students in the Forever GI Bill because of the importance of these degrees. If there are specific requirements that are a barrier for students to utilize this extension, then they should be removed. Education for veterans is a top priority for the VFW, and we especially want to see veterans succeed in high-demand fields.

H.R. XXXX, To amend title 38, United States Code, to waive the fee for a housing loan guaranteed by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs for a veteran with a service-connected disability who applied for such loan before receiving a disability rating from the Secretary

The VFW supports this proposal that would specifically benefit active duty service members who utilize the VA Home Loan Guarantee program prior to receiving a disability rating from VA. Current housing market volatility and uncertainty can create an environment for service members where they cannot wait until VA finishes processing their disability claims before capitalizing on the opportunity to purchase a home. Some service members may opt to finalize purchasing a home when the right opportunity arises rather than waiting months to receive a VA disability rating.

This proposal would ensure that service members who have conducted a pre-discharge examination can still receive the funding fee back from VA if they receive a ratings decision after finalizing the purchase of a home. We support the intent of this change but believe the language should be changed to “effective date” instead of date of examination. This would ensure that service members retain the earliest effective date for eligibility. The process for examinations happens after a notice of intent is filed, so changing this language to effective date would provide service members with an earlier timeframe.

The VFW would like to ensure that if this proposal becomes law, veterans have the flexibility to choose what is in their best financial interest. We would hope the options to pay down the principle of the mortgage or to receive the reimbursement from VA would both be available.

H.R. XXXX, Transparency for Student Veterans Act of 2023

The VFW supports the intent of this draft proposal to require VA to report on outcomes of student veterans who have used education benefits. However, we would like clarification that providing data would not overly burden the schools. Additionally, the memorandum of understanding with the Department of Education should be mandatory and established before this reporting is required by VA. This measure would ensure appropriate coordination of efforts. Currently, VA cannot track accurate graduation rates of student veterans. This can only be accomplished by requiring the Department of Education to identify and track student veteran progress and completion in post-secondary education. This memorandum of understanding partnership would be key to these metrics reporting efforts.

Chairman Van Orden, this concludes my testimony. Again, the VFW thanks you and Ranking Member Levin for the opportunity to testify on these important issues before this subcommittee. I am prepared to take 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 2023, 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.

Prepared Statement of Marquis Barefield

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin and Members of the Subcommittee:

DAV (Disabled American Veterans) has a mission that includes the principle that this Nation's first duty to veterans is the rehabilitation and welfare of its wartime disabled. This principle envisions vocational rehabilitation and/or education to assist these veterans to prepare for and obtain gainful employment, enhanced opportunities for employment, job placement and self-employment, so that the full array of talents and abilities of disabled veterans are used productively and to their greatest levels.

We are a resolution-based organization, which means we can support legislation if we have a resolution that is adopted by our membership body at our annual national convention. We are pleased to provide our views on the bills impacting service-disabled veterans, their families and the programs administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that are under consideration by the Subcommittee.

H.R. 522, the Deliver for Veterans Act

The Deliver for Veterans Act would include the shipping cost to deliver a vehicle to a veteran that has entitlement to the VA Adaptive Vehicle Grant.

Currently, a veteran can only spend funds from the Adaptive Vehicle Grant on the purchase of a vehicle excluding the shipping costs. This legislation would correct this problem by allowing a veteran to have their vehicle shipped to them without having to pay an additional charge.

DAV strongly supports H.R. 522, the Deliver for Veterans Act in accordance with DAV Resolution No. 032. We believe that veterans should never have to cover costs that are related to their earned VA benefits.

H.R. 2830, the Veteran Improvement Commercial Driver License Act of 2023

The Veteran Improvement Commercial Driver License (CDL) Act would approve a commercial driver education program at a branch of an institution of higher education if the program offered at the branch by the educational institution is appropriately licensed and uses the same curriculum that is offered at the main campus of the institution and is approved by a state agency.

H.R. 2830 would ensure CDL schools that offer courses at new branches do not have to wait two years if the primary institution has been approved by the VA and state approving agencies to receive GI bill benefits. It is estimated that 8,400 commercial driving programs have been approved for use by eligible veterans under the GI bill.

This bipartisan legislation will ease the pathway for veterans to acquire a commercial driving license, helping address the trucking shortage, employ veterans, and strengthen our supply chains. In accordance with DAV Resolution No. 187, we fully support the Veterans Improvement Commercial Driver License Act as it would provide unique opportunities for service-disabled veterans to obtain a CDL and overcome their employment barriers.

H.R. 3601, the Student Veteran Work Study Modernization Act

The Student Veteran Work Study Modernization Act would require VA to implement a five-year pilot program to expand eligibility for the work-study allowance program to individuals who are pursuing programs of rehabilitation, education, or training at a rate equal to at least half of that required of a full-time student.

The VA Work Study program allows veterans to earn money while enrolled in an institution of higher education, vocational, or professional program. Participants gain paid work experience while furthering their education. Currently, the program limits the types of positions a student veteran can hold and does not permit payment at local minimum wage rates. The program also requires enrollment on at least a three-quarter-time basis, excluding half-time enrollees.

Pursuing higher education and gaining meaningful employment are two of the most common post-military endeavors for veterans as they transition to civilian life, and the VA's work-study program has been an invaluable tool in accomplishing both goals for many student veterans. As the VA modernizes and digitizes numerous other benefits, it's imperative that the department provides greater transparency to Congress about the program's successes while expanding its eligibility to student veterans who are pursuing academic programs on at least a half-time basis.

In accordance with DAV Resolution No. 183, we proudly support the Student Veteran Work Study Modernization Act. The VA work-study program better positions

student veterans for future employment and H.R. 3601 will provide this benefit to more service-disabled veterans, which will result in more victories for veterans.

H.R. 3722, the Daniel J. Harvey, Jr. and Adam Lambert Improving Service-member Transition to Reduce Veteran Suicide and the Amendment in the Nature of a Substitute to it

H.R. 3722 would require the Department of Defense (DoD) and VA to jointly carry out a five-year pilot program to assess the feasibility and advisability of providing certain services and a module comprised of specified elements as part of the pre-separation transition process for members of the Armed Forces for the purpose of reducing the incidence of suicide among veterans. DAV supported this bill in its original form.

The Amendment in the Nature of a Substitute to H.R. 3722 states that under the DoD Transition Assistance Program (TAP) program mental health services will be available for service members with certain mental health markers, to include post-traumatic stress disorder, risk of suicide, treatment options for those with substance-use disorders and potential stressors associated with leaving active military service. Under the VA Solid Start Program the amendment would assist eligible veterans to enroll in the program and educate them on mental health and counseling services available through the Veterans Health Administration. A joint report from DoD and VA is due to the committees on information gathered from these programs.

The DoD TAP program provides information and training to ensure service members leaving active duty are prepared for their next step in life, whether pursuing additional education, finding employment in the public or private sector, or starting their own business.

The VA portion of TAP is a one-day, in-person course called VA Benefits and Services. Led by VA Benefits Advisors, the course helps veterans understand how to navigate VA and the benefits and services they have earned through their military career. The course offers interactive exercises, real examples, and covers topics important to veterans like family support, disability compensation, education, and health care benefits.

H.R. 3722 would add or improve mental health services to both sides of the transition process to ensure that service members and veterans are well aware of the mental health services that are available to them and their families.

We strongly supports H.R. 3722 and the Amendment in the Nature of a Substitute to it in accordance with DAV Resolution Nos. 059 and 160, which support legislation to improve and reform TAP programs, to include mental health services for our transitioning service members, veterans and their families.

H.R. 3738, to establish in the Department of Veterans Affairs the Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration

H.R. 3738 would establish the Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration. This administration would have a projected start date of October 1, 2024, be responsible for six departments within the VA and provide veterans, their dependents and survivors assistance with related economic opportunities. The bill requires an annual report during the fiscal year to include information on the number of claims received and denied, as well as other information.

The Under Secretary for this administration will be appointed by the President. Once a vacancy happens or is anticipated, a commission will be established to recommend individuals to the President. The commission will be comprised of 10 individuals from various areas within the VA, to include the Deputy Secretary of the VA.

No later than six months after the passage of this Act, the VA Secretary must submit a report on the progress of establishing the new Administration and the transition of the provision of services to veterans. The VA Secretary would be required to certify that the transition of the provision of services to the Administration will not negatively affect services to veterans and that such services are ready to be transferred. Certification can happen no earlier than April 1, 2024 and no later than September 1, 2024. If certification cannot be administered during the required time period, the Secretary would be required to furnish a report on the reasons why the certification was not achieved and estimate a timeframe on when it can be completed.

Establishing a fourth administration within the VA dedicated to creating economic opportunities for veterans would increase the visibility and accountability of all veterans education and employment-related programs. For example, as we highlighted in our testimony before this Subcommittee on September 15, 2022, the Veterans Readiness and Employment Program started working on an electronic case

management system for vocational rehabilitation counselors however, after nine years, three failed attempts for a digital platform and over \$20 million spent, Veteran Readiness & Employment (VR&E) still does not have a digital case management system.

DAV believes that the failures of the VR&E case management system is indicative of a lack of focus, direction, as well as a constant change of administrations. This is one of many examples of why we believe VA needs a fourth administration.

Based on DAV Resolution No. 405, we recommend Congress separate from the Veterans Benefits Administration all programs related to economic opportunity and create a new administration that should be appropriately funded and administered by an Under Secretary for Economic Opportunity.

H.R. 3816, the Veterans' Entry to Apprenticeship Act

The Veterans' Entry to Apprenticeship Act would make pre-apprenticeship programs available to eligible veterans and dependents who are using VA educational programs, such as the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill and Dependents Educational Assistance (DEA) Program also referenced as Chapter 35 benefits.

H.R. 3816 would allow for a pre-apprenticeship program to be covered if the curriculum is approved by a sponsor that can certify to the VA that the program will prepare an individual with skills and competencies needed to enroll in a registered apprenticeship program. Additionally, it grants a veteran eligibility for a specified amount of housing assistance if not paid as part of a pre-apprenticeship program.

Transitioning from service to civilian life provides a number of challenges for veterans and their families. If they are able to better prepare for an apprenticeship program success is more likely. We are pleased that that legislation includes DEA for family members however, we note that it does not include VR&E. Although VR&E does include apprenticeship programs, it does not provide for pre-apprenticeship programs therefore, we recommend that a provision for VR&E be added, as service-disabled veterans face many barriers due to disabilities incurred during military service.

In accordance with DAV Resolution No. 187, we fully support H.R. 3816, the Veterans' Entry to Apprenticeship Act and request that the Subcommittee consider our recommendation noted above for inclusion of VR&E to ensure parity for all veterans utilizing these VA programs.

H.R. 5190, the Military Family Protection from Debt Act

The Military Protection from Debt Act would amend the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act to extend the protections for others than active military service.

The legislation would reduce interest rates on pre-service loans for the families of Reserve and Guard service members serving on active duty and ease financial burdens while their service member is deployed. Interest rates are already capped at 6 percent for service members during their deployment—H.R. 5190 would provide parity by expanding the same protections to military family members.

While we do not have a resolution to support this legislation, we would not oppose its passage.

H.R. 5785, to modify the requirements of the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship

The Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship allows eligible veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill or dependents using the Fry Scholarship to get added benefits. This scholarship provides up to nine months (or \$30,000) of benefits for training in high-demand fields.

Currently, an eligible student veteran would have to be pursuing a post-secondary degree, dual degree or an undergraduate degree in certain fields of study before consideration can be given for this scholarship. Additionally, a student veteran would have to have 60 semester or 90 quarter hours to be eligible for the scholarship.

The modification to the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship would broaden the entitlement to eligibility for and decrease the number of semester or quarter hours required to become eligible for the scholarship. If implemented, the bill would change those requirements to allow graduate students or those pursuing a graduate degree program eligibility for the scholarship. It would also lower the semester and quarter hours requirements to 45 semester hours or 67.5 quarter hours.

We support the modification to the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship program, based on DAV Resolution No. 187. We need to ensure that student veterans have the ability to fully access their earned educational benefits while removing barriers that could derail their continued education.

Draft bill, the Expanding Access for Online Veteran Students Act

The Expanding Access for Online Veteran Students Act would increase the monthly housing stipend for student veterans that pursue their education through distance learning for the summer quarter or semester. The rate of allowance would be equal to the amount paid to other student veterans based on a standard formula. The effective date for this housing allowance would be August 1, 2024.

Additionally, this legislation would positively impact rural and highly rural student veterans by providing them the ability to continue their education with an institution of higher learning that may be out of their normal commuting area.

We are pleased to support this draft bill—the Expanding Access for Online Veteran Students Act, based on DAV Resolution No. 187. We need to ensure that student veterans have the ability to fully access their earned educational benefits while removing barriers that could derail their continued education. This legislation would help to provide them the means to reach their full potential without prohibitions.

Draft bill, to improve the processes to approve programs of education for purposes of the educational assistance programs of the Department of Veterans Affairs

This draft legislation would require that student veterans are provided with a form that includes significant information about the cost of the course and other relevant information. The student would be able to compare the course with other similar courses offered at other schools to determine which aid package would be to their advantage. This legislation would also require the VA to establish and update a website to be used as the central location for training information for VA School Certifying Officials (SCO).

A SCO is an employee of an educational institution with the primary responsibility for certifying veteran enrollment at the educational institution. SCOs at educational institutions normally have at least 20 or more enrolled student veterans using educational assistance. They are required to complete training prior to being authorized to certify enrollments to VA. This legislation would create a centralized location for SCOs to find the most up-to-date training information.

Currently, student veterans are not provided enough information to make good decisions on what courses to take and what school offers the better aid package for them. This bill would provide students with more information to make a better-informed decision about where and how to use their educational benefits.

In accordance with DAV Resolution No. 187, DAV strongly supports this legislation, which will remove barriers and streamline the education process for service-disabled veterans.

Draft bill, the Transparency for Student Veterans Act

The Transparency for Student Veterans Act would provide student veterans with additional information about programs of education leading to a certificate or professional license at a particular institution of higher learning. The bill would also require tracking of certain student veteran information, to include how many have reenrolled after the first year, the number of them that have completed their degrees or received a certificate or professional license. It would also track the time period in which it took student veterans to finish their program of study and the annual salaries they received once their programs have been completed.

Additionally, this legislation would require the VA Secretary to enter into a memorandum of understanding with the Secretary of Education and the leaders of other relevant federal agencies to gather information on the outcomes of the student veterans who use the programs of educational assistance at institutions of higher learning.

Currently, student veterans do not have all of the information they need to make informed decisions about their options for educational programs at their institutions of higher learning. This bill would provide student veterans with key information to help them determine if they want to continue their educational program at a particular school.

We support this draft legislation—the Transparency for Student Veterans Act, based on DAV Resolution Nos. 070 and 187. VA systems need to be upgraded and improved to help facilitate the flow of information to student veterans and their dependents, especially those receiving educational assistance from the VA. There is a need for VA to share vital information for student veterans so they can use their earned educational benefits to their fullest extent.

Draft bill, the Consolidating Veteran Employment Services for Improved Performance Act of 2023

The Consolidating Veteran Employment Services for Improved Performance Act would transfer functions performed by the Department of Labor (DOL) to the VA. This would apply to the following programs, effective October 1, 2025:

- Job counseling, training, and placement services for veterans under chapter 41 of title 38, United States Code;
- Federal Government employment services by the Secretary of Labor under section 4214 of title 38, United States Code;
- Administration of employment and reemployment rights of members of the uniformed services under chapter 43 of title 38, United States Code;
- Homeless veterans reintegration programs under chapter 20 of title 38, United States Code; and
- Employment and veterans benefits training under the Transition Assistance Program under section 1144 of title 10, United States Code.

A new Deputy Under Secretary for Veterans' Employment and Training would be established within VA to oversee these functions, along with any other employment, unemployment, and training programs affecting veterans.

Additionally, this would consolidate the current positions of Local Veterans' Employment Representative (LVER) and Disabled Veterans Outreach Program (DVOP) Specialist into a new position called Veterans Employment Specialist. Current LVERs and DVOPs, who are employed directly by states, would be retained and reclassified to these new positions.

DAV does not have a resolution on this specific issue, and takes no formal position on this draft bill.

Draft bill, to waive the fee for a housing loan guaranteed by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs for a veteran with a service-connected disability who applied for such loan before receiving a disability rating from the Secretary

This draft legislation would grant a veteran a refund of their housing loan fee if the veteran was awarded disability compensation prior to the date of their loan application.

The VA funding fee is a one-time payment that the veteran, service member, or survivor pays on a VA-backed or VA direct home loan. This fee helps to lower the cost of the loan for U.S. taxpayers because the VA home loan program doesn't require down payments or monthly mortgage insurance.

A veteran would not have to pay the VA funding fee if they are in receipt of VA compensation for a service-connected disability. But if a veteran applied for a VA home loan prior to receiving their award of benefits from the VA, then they may be eligible for a refund of the VA funding fee if they are later awarded VA compensation for a service-connected disability. The effective date of their VA compensation must be retroactive to before the date of the loan closing.

DAV does not have a specific resolution that would allow our support for this legislation, but we understand the importance of this benefit for potential service-disabled veterans and their families and would not oppose passage of this legislation.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony on behalf of DAV. I am happy to answer any questions you or members of the Subcommittee may have.

Clarifying Statement of Marquis Barefield

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin and Members of the Subcommittee: Please consider this as my statement to clarify our testimony at the November 2, 2023, subcommittee legislative hearing. During our discussion on H.R. 3738, we stated that there were three failed attempts to create an electronic case management system for Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (VRCs) by Veteran Readiness & Employment (VR&E).

The first failed attempt started in 2015 and ended in 2018. At the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity hearing of May 17, 2018, VR&E acknowledged that in 2015, they started working on an electronic case management system for VRCs. It was confirmed that after three years and \$12 million, they did not have a viable operating electronic case management system.

At the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity hearing of June 4, 2019, in VA's written testimony, they indicated the failure of the first

attempt at an electronic case management system and their intentions of moving forward with Software for Service and indicated it would be awarded by the end of FY 2019.

Subsequently, VR&E leadership indicated that the second effort for a case management system, the Software for Service contract was not continued. It was determined that there were too many delays and a lack of confidence that this system was correctly and timely processing payments to schools and to veterans. Additionally, they stood up a VA internal team to address the actual processes and requirements of a new system. They spent eight months evaluating what happened and what went wrong with the Software for Service system and engaged the MITRE Corporation for their review.

At the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity hearing of September 15, 2022, VR&E acknowledged the failure of the second attempt and in 2021 they started developing the Readiness & Employment System (RES), the third attempt of an electronic case management system.

In April of this year, GovCIO was awarded a 10-year \$141 million contract to develop and create RES, the much-needed electronic case management system for VR&E counselors.

There have been two failed attempts to create an electronic case management system for VR&E. The third attempt has been underway since 2021, the contract has been awarded and development has begun.

To clarify our previous testimony, nearly nine years later, over \$20 million spent on two failed attempts and a third attempt in progress that will cost an additional \$140 million, VR&E still does not have an electronic case management system.

We thank you for the opportunity to clarify our previous testimony.

Prepared Statement of Tammy Barlet



**TESTIMONY 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**

October 18, 2023



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Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, 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 and expansive network of on-campus chapters across the country, 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, military-connected students, their families and survivors can effectively connect, expand their skills, and ultimately achieve their greatest potential.

SVA thanks the Subcommittee for considering several pieces of legislation that would impact student veterans and other military-affiliated students in higher education.

H.R. 5702, the Expanding Access for Online Veteran Students Act

SVA supports this bill which would increase the online Monthly Housing Allowance (MHA) rate to the full national average for GI Bill students enrolled fully online during the summer.

For years, online GI Bill students have received only half the national average in MHA. This is despite the GI Bill paying tuition and fees similarly for both in-person and online students. Due to the steadily increasing number of online courses at many institutions, including flagship colleges and universities, we now see this disparity, paradoxically, even impacting otherwise in-person students.

Many of SVA's policy priorities come from student veterans themselves. Student Veteran of the Year and former SVA Chapter President at Loyola University in Chicago, Josh Jones, flagged this issue for SVA. Josh saw firsthand how the substantially reduced MHA rate for online learners negatively impacted his in-person peers. Josh and some of his peers needed to enroll in certain courses over the summer but soon realized the institution was only offering those courses online. They eventually found themselves enrolled fully online and left with no choice but to wrestle with the drastic cut in their housing allowance. In Chicago, the full MHA rate is roughly \$2,700, which is reduced to just slightly more than \$1,000 if students are enrolled fully online—a roughly 63 percent reduction.

With support from SVA, Josh spearheaded an effort to raise awareness about this issue and find a legislative fix. After discussing the matter and possible solutions with committee leadership and staff earlier this year, we are pleased to see this legislation receiving the attention it deserves. This was only possible with the dedicated work of committee staff and the bipartisan leadership of Representatives Ciscomani, Stanton, Stansbury, and Van Orden.

The Expanding Access for Online Veteran Students Act would substantially increase the online MHA rate for GI Bill students enrolled in summer courses from half the national average to the full national average, which is roughly \$2,100.¹ While SVA would have preferred full parity between local in-person and the online rates, we recognize that this bill will nevertheless have a substantially positive financial impact on VA education beneficiaries enrolled online over the summer by helping them cover a far greater percentage of their housing

¹ In some locations, this would result in online GI Bill students receiving larger MHA payments than in-person students in the same area. This incongruity underscores the need to comprehensively address the issue by matching online MHA rates directly to local in-person MHA rates. VA could require online GI Bill beneficiaries to regularly attest to their home address with penalties for false statements and verify their home of record via official documentation like that used to verify voting eligibility. The VA already has regular touchpoints with beneficiaries thanks to the enrollment certification requirement, and address verification could simply be integrated into that or a similar process. The Department could then use the verified address information to determine the appropriate Military Housing Area by which to calculate online students' MHA. As one of the most well-resourced agencies in the federal government that is well into a multi-year GI Bill modernization effort, we believe VA is more than capable of managing such a system.



costs.

This bill is a groundbreaking piece of legislation that represents the first legislative attempt in recent memory to address the disparity in MHA rates between in-person and online GI Bill students. As the prevalence of online courses surges, even within prominent public and non-profit universities, and the noticeable decrease in MHA rates for online learners starts affecting otherwise in-person students, it is imperative that we acknowledge the lack of a valid justification for these rate disparities.²

SVA firmly believes there are pragmatic ways to ensure that all online GI Bill students receive a full monthly housing allowance tied to their local cost of living. We stand ready to share and explore those proposals with members of this Subcommittee and hope this legislation is just the first step toward the ultimate goal of achieving true parity in MHA rates for online GI Bill students.

We thank Subcommittee staff for their work on this legislation, and we applaud the leadership of Representatives Cicomani, Stanton, Stansbury, and Van Orden in introducing this forward-thinking legislative proposal. We encourage the Subcommittee to advance this bill swiftly.

H.R. 3601, the Student Veteran Work Study Modernization Act

SVA supports this legislation which would allow VA education beneficiaries to participate in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Work Study (VAWS) program if they are enrolled on a half-time basis.

VAWS is an invaluable program that provides participants with critical financial support during their studies. Unfortunately, the program limits eligibility to those who are enrolled least ½ time. According to SVA's most recent census, roughly 50 percent of respondents have children and approximately 20 percent identify as single parents.³ For some of these individuals, enrolling at a rate that is less than ½ time might be the best fit for them and their families, but it cuts them off from the benefits of VAWS.

The Student Veteran Work Study Modernization Act would address this issue by establishing a pilot program that expands eligibility for VAWS to those enrolled at least half-time. The bill would also require VA to collect and report new information about VAWS, including the total number of participants, how many graduate with a four-year degree, and the number who secure full-time employment with VA.

This legislation represents just one step in the effort to modernize VAWS. We commend this bill's sponsor, Congressman Cartwright, for his leadership on the complementary and comprehensive H.R. 3600, the VA Work-Study Improvement Act.⁴ This bill was first conceived by former VFW-SVA Fellow John Randolph and would make critical refinements to the VAWS program so it can better serve participants. It would expand the type of qualifying activities participants can pursue to better align with academic and professional goals, increase pay, modernize the time-keeping process, and require VA to report detailed information about how the program serves participants. The VAWS program must continue to create avenues of success on campus and beyond, and the

² The legislative history provides a confusing rationale for the reduced online MHA rate. According to a 2010 senate report on the legislation that set the rate, Congress seemed to assume that online GI Bill students had no need for the full allowance because they were learning from home and the full allowance was intended to "offset the cost of housing away from home." S. REP. 111-346, 11, 2010 U.S.C.A.N. 1503, 1505. It is not clear what "the cost of housing away from home" means, especially in the context of student veterans—many of whom are independent, have families, and are not necessarily living on campus.

³ DR. ABBY KINCH, STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA, 2022 SVA CENSUS 5 (2023) (on file with author).

⁴ See generally *H.R. 3600 – VA Work-Study Improvement Act*, CONGRESS.GOV, <https://www.congress.gov/bills/118/congress/house-bills/3600> (last visited Oct. 11, 2023).



VA Work-Study Improvement Act will ensure it does just that.

We applaud Congressman Cartwright for his leadership on this issue and his staff for their extensive work on these bills. We ask that the Subcommittee advance the Student Veteran Work Study Modernization Act and endeavor to do the same for the VA Work-Study Improvement Act.

H.R. 5785, To amend title 38, United States Code, to modify the requirements of the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship

SVA supports this legislation that would make needed improvements to the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship and help more beneficiaries access this critical benefit.

STEM careers are vital to our Nation's economy, ability to be competitive on the world stage, and national defense, among other things. Student veterans are an excellent match for STEM careers. In fact, SVA research shows that STEM majors are among the most popular degree paths for GI Bill students.⁵ Yet, STEM degrees often take longer to complete than others and can push student veterans and other military-connected students beyond the 36 months of education benefits provided by the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

The Edith Nourse Rogers STEM scholarship provides an important extension of VA education benefits for those pursuing STEM degrees. However, a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report from September 2022 showed the scholarship has had an alarmingly low participation rate since its inception, raising concerns about barriers preventing beneficiaries from accessing the benefit.⁶

This bill aims to increase scholarship participation rates by eliminating requirements that restrict eligibility and delay beneficiaries' ability to apply. The legislation also expands scholarship eligibility to graduate students pursuing STEM degrees. Together, these fixes represent substantial refinements to the scholarship that should enable more beneficiaries to access this valuable extension of education benefits and ultimately complete their STEM programs.

SVA thanks Representative Budzinski for her leadership on this legislation.

H.R. 5956, To amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide additional information about certain postsecondary educational institutions to individuals entitled to educational assistance under the laws administered by such Secretary

SVA supports this legislation which would add important categories of new information to the GI Bill Comparison Tool and ensure it provides information on certificate and professional licensing programs.

The GI Bill Comparison Tool is a critical resource that helps student veterans and other military-affiliated students make informed decisions about their academic futures. Over the last several years, VA has made substantial improvements to the tool, such as allowing users to compare institutions and search by location via a map interface. We commend VA for their demonstrated commitment to continually improving this vital resource.

Yet, more can and must be done to improve not just the functionality of the tool, but the quantity and quality of information it provides. There is currently a glaring lack of publicly available information on student veteran

⁵ CATE, C.A., LYON, J.S., SCHMELING, J., & BOGUE, B.Y., STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA, NATIONAL VETERAN EDUCATION SUCCESS TRACKER: A REPORT ON THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF STUDENT VETERANS USING THE POST-9/11 GI BILL 34 (2017).

⁶ See generally U.S. GOV'T ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE, GAO-22-105326, HIGHER EDUCATION: VA COULD IMPROVE SUPPORT FOR VETERANS PURSUING STEM DEGREES (Sept. 29, 2022), available at <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-105326>.



outcomes. While the Department of Education provides a variety of information on student outcomes broadly at institutions of higher education via its College Scorecard, similar information on student veterans is conspicuously absent from the GI Bill Comparison Tool.

This bill would add several new categories of critical information to the GI Bill Comparison Tool. The new information would include second-year re-enrollment rates, completion rates disaggregated by degree, license, and credential type, and how long it takes GI Bill students to complete their programs. The legislation would also increase transparency about post-graduation earnings by requiring VA to link to a database that provides the average annual earnings for each program. The bill further requires VA to enter into a memorandum of understanding with other relevant federal agencies to obtain outcome data for those using VA education benefits.

SVA offers two pieces of technical feedback. First, it may be worth considering how the bill language can be amended to ensure students are captured in the re-enrollment data point if their institutions do not operate on a standard academic year calendar. The current language references reenrollment after "the first year," which may exclude students in programs that operate on non-traditional terms. Second, we recommend removing the "seek to" language in directing VA to enter into MOUs with other federal agencies. The Department will already have had two years to plan and orchestrate the MOUs, which is ample time. Any further delay only pushes back the date by which VA can incorporate the new data into the GI Bill Comparison Tool.

SVA greatly appreciates this legislation and looks forward to working with the Subcommittee to advance it.

H.R. 5914, To amend title 38, United States Code, to improve the processes to approve programs of education for purposes of the educational assistance programs of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes

SVA supports the intent of this legislation which would clarify the institutional disclosure requirements and require VA to create a central online repository for School Certifying Official (SCO) training information. We offer minor recommendations for improving the bill's language.

Current law requires institutions to disclose certain information to VA education beneficiaries about the cost of attendance, financial aid, program outcomes, and more.⁷ These are important disclosures, and SVA continues to support them. However, institutions must have some flexibility in providing these disclosures because there can be limitations on the information available to them and their ability to provide exact cost estimates at specific points in time. This legislation clarifies that the disclosure requirements are intended to be fulfilled to the greatest extent possible, thus maintaining the mandate that institutions provide this critical information where and when able but affording them reasonable flexibility in doing so.

Separately, this bill seeks to address longstanding communication issues between VA and SCOs. For years, SCOs have raised concerns about the quality of VA's communications and transparency with them, including issues with VA not providing timely, accurate, and consistent information. This legislation attempts to address these issues by requiring VA to create a central online repository to house SCO training information. While SVA supports the intent of this provision, we note that VA already maintains an SCO training webpage and SCO Online Training Portal.⁸ Nevertheless, we believe there may be ways to improve this webpage by expanding the scope of information that VA makes available. We support the American Council on Education's (ACE) recommendation to establish "a dedicated webpage for all VA's Education Service policies, guidance, and

⁷ 38 U.S.C. § 3679(f)(1).

⁸ *School Certifying Official (SCO) Training*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (Sept. 28, 2023), https://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/resources/education_resources/school_certifying_officials/online_sco_training.asp.



training.”⁹ Lastly, we recommend including a requirement that VA update the information in a timely manner in addition to doing so regularly.

SVA supports the intent of this legislation and welcomes the opportunity to explore additional improvements to VA’s communications with SCOs and institutions.

H.R. 3738, To amend title 38, United States Code, to establish in the Department of Veterans Affairs the Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration, and for other purposes

SVA supports this legislation which would create a new Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration within VA.

For years, SVA and others have called for the creation of a fourth administration at VA—a Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration (VEOTA). This new administration would provide VA’s several economic opportunity programs with the dedicated, senior-level leadership they deserve. As DAV, PVA, and VFW pointed out in the 2019 Independent Budget, a “new undersecretary for EO would refocus resources, provide a champion for these programs, and create a central point of contact for veterans service organizations and Congress.”¹⁰

As we’ve noted in the past, a greater focus must be placed on economic opportunity for veterans, including through higher education. VA can best achieve this by building on the success of the current office dedicated to transition and economic opportunity and elevating it, and Education Service, to its own administration. Presently, economic opportunity programs such as the GI Bill, home loan guaranty, and many other empowering programs for veterans are buried within the bureaucracy of the Veterans Benefits Administration and functionally in competition with disability compensation for resources and prioritization.

The Veterans Benefits Administration’s (VBA) portfolio includes several massive business lines—a reality well-illustrated by the disability compensation and pension and VA education benefits programs. According to VA, “[i]n 2022 alone, [VBA] completed more than 1.7 million disability compensation and pension claims for Veterans, an all-time VA record that broke the previous year’s record by 12%.”¹¹ As for education benefits, recent data show there are roughly 850,000 GI Bill students enrolled in nearly 40,000 educational programs and 20,000 apprenticeship and on-the-job-training programs.¹² A VEOTA would recognize the enormity of the many benefit programs currently siloed under VBA, separate them, and, in doing so, ensure they receive the appropriate resources, attention, and prioritization that they require.

Over the past century, VA has focused on compensating veterans for loss. Still, the reality of the 21st century and beyond also demands that we empower veterans to excel financially post-service. Financial stability is a key social determinant of health that compliments other VA goals like caring for veterans’ “Whole Health” and

⁹ *Less is More: The Impact of Bureaucratic Red Tape on Veterans Education Benefits: Hearing Before the H. Comm. on Veterans’ Affairs Subcomm. on Economic Opportunity*, 118th Cong. 5 (2023) (written testimony of Anne H. Meehan, Assistant Vice President, Government Relations, American Council on Education), available at <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR10/20230920/116307/HHRG-118-VR10-Wstate-MeehanA-20230920.pdf>.

¹⁰ DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS ET AL., *THE INDEPENDENT BUDGET: VETERANS AGENDA FOR THE 116th CONGRESS 120-22* (2019), available at https://www.independentbudget.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/IndependentBudget_2019.pdf.

¹¹ *Veterans Benefits Administration Reports*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (Oct. 10, 2023), https://www.benefits.va.gov/reports/detailed_claims_data.asp.

¹² *GI Bill Comparison Tool*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS, <https://www.va.gov/education/gi-bill-comparison-tool/> (providing downloadable data on all schools).



combatting veteran suicide. A VEOTA would bolster these shared goals while also resulting in impressive returns on the taxpayers' investments.

Lastly, a VEOTA would enhance VA's ability to serve transitioning servicemembers effectively through the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). If, as highlighted at the May hearing on transition before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Committee members believe VA should take the lead on TAP, that is all the more reason to establish a VEOTA.¹³ VA's TAP efforts must have dedicated and accountable leadership if we are to do right by our transitioning servicemembers.

We thank Representative Wenstrup for championing this important legislation.

H.R. 3816, the Veterans' Entry to Apprenticeship Act

SVA supports the intent of this legislation but opposes it in its current form.

SVA represents chapter members who are largely enrolled at institutions of higher education. However, we recognize and respect the versatility of VA education benefits which allow beneficiaries the freedom to pursue a plethora of education and training opportunities, including apprenticeship programs.

Quality pre-apprenticeship programs can be a helpful steppingstone in accessing entry-level Registered Apprenticeship Programs (RAPs). This bill would allow VA education benefits to be used for pre-apprenticeship programs. While SVA is not opposed to this in principle, we have concerns about the legislation's current language. First, the bill's language appears to indirectly preclude approval of any pre-apprenticeship program governed by state standards.¹⁴ Second, the bill provides just two primary requirements for program approval: that the curriculum be approved by a "sponsor" who certifies it will prepare participants for a RAP, and that the program comply with the sponsor's attendance and conduct policies. There are no limits on who can sponsor a pre-apprenticeship program or any requirement that the sponsor or its program curriculum be formally associated with or approved by a RAP. The bill's language allows "any...public, private, or nonprofit entity" to be a program sponsor subject to the Secretary's discretion.

SVA offers the following recommendations to help ensure only quality pre-apprenticeship programs receive approval for VA education benefits:

- Require program compliance with state pre-apprenticeship standards where applicable
- Add additional approval criteria to ensure participants get a reasonable return on their investment such as:
 - Certification that a program trains to industry standards and is approved by a RAP
 - A requirement that programs provide hands-on learning opportunities
 - A requirement that programs provide the opportunity to earn at least one industry-recognized credential

¹³ See generally *The Transition Assistance Program: Steps to Ensure Success for Servicemembers as they Enter Civilian Life: Hearing Before the H. Comm. on Veterans' Affairs, Subcomm. on Economic Opportunity*, 118th Cong., (May 17, 2023), available at <https://veterans.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=6175>.

¹⁴ The bill provides that "a pre-apprenticeship program may be covered...in the case of a program for which a State does not require any such standards..." and makes no additional reference to programs which are subject to state standards. Veterans' Entry to Apprenticeship Act, H.R. 3816, 118th Cong. § 2(a) (2023) (emphasis added).



- A requirement that programs offer opportunities for facilitated entry into a RAP through a formal agreement with at least one RAP¹⁵

SVA appreciates the intent of this bill and looks forward to working with members and staff to refine its language to ensure pre-apprenticeship program participants get the training they need and that sets them up for success in a RAP.

Additional Legislation

SVA also supports the intent of the following legislation:

- H.R. 5190, Military Family Protection from Debt Act¹⁶
- H.R. 2830, Veteran Improvement Commercial Driver License Act of 2023¹⁷
- ANS to H.R. 3722, the Daniel J. Harvey, Jr. and Adam Lambert Improving Servicemember Transition to Reduce Veteran Suicide Act

○

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. Today's student veterans carry this legacy forward.

We thank the Chairman, Ranking Member, and the Subcommittee Members for your time, attention, and devotion to the cause of veterans in higher education. As always, we welcome your feedback and questions.

¹⁵ These recommendations are based on the elements of quality pre-apprenticeship programs as identified by the Department of Labor and the definition of pre-apprenticeship program under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. *Explore Pre-apprenticeship*, UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF LABOR, <https://www.apprenticeship.gov/employers/explore-pre-apprenticeship> (last accessed Oct. 5 2023); 20 C.F.R. § 681.480.

¹⁶ This bill's language appears to unintentionally remove spouses from the relevant interest rate cap protection. SVA's support for this legislation is conditioned on our belief that this was unintentional and that it will be remedied.

¹⁷ Since SVA's initial endorsement, we have learned that State Approving Agencies have multiple concerns with this bill's language. We strongly encourage the Subcommittee to reengage in stakeholder conversations with SAAs and VSOs so the bill's language can be appropriately refined.

Prepared Statement of Joseph Wescott

Introduction

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin and members of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, I am pleased to appear before you today on behalf of the fifty-two-member State agencies of the National Association of State Approving Agencies (NASAA). I appreciate the opportunity to provide comments to this committee on legislation pertaining to veterans' education and training and the GI Bill. I am accompanied today by NASAA President Frank Myers and Vice President Rebecca Ryan.

Role of the State Approving Agencies: Past and Present

State Approving Agencies (SAAs) play a critical role in the administration of GI Bill benefits. Shortly after passage of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, or the GI Bill of Rights, Congress, recognizing it was the responsibility of the states within our federal system of government to oversee the education of its citizens, required that each State establish a "State Approving Agency." In response, the governor of each state designated a state bureau or department as the SAA. The SAA was to be supported through reimbursement of its expenses by the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Thus evolved a truly cooperative federal-state partnership that maintains the rights of the states while monitoring and protecting a federally sponsored program administered under the terms and conditions of federal law.

The original GI Bill, as enacted in 1944, relied on state agencies to establish standards for and to approve programs of education in which eligible individuals could use GI Bill benefits. Over time SAAs have evolved to become the primary means of assuring institutional accountability. Federal law is clear in that SAAs are the primary governmental body through which approval of education and training for Veterans' educational benefits is to occur. With specialized authorization under the Code of Federal Regulations and state statutes, they exercise the state's authority to approve, disapprove and monitor education and training programs. The SAA brings to this mission knowledge of state law and regulations as well as knowledge of the local environment and needs of the state. SAAs also assist the states and VA with exposing fraudulent and criminal activity involving the payment of Veteran's benefits.

In 1948, SAA representatives met to form a professional organization to promote high professional standards, create a forum for the exchange of best practices, and to promote uniformity of purpose and practice. For more than seventy-five years now, NASAA has worked with our VA partners, the VSOs, and all agencies to ensure the greatest numbers of quality programs are available to those eligible for education and training benefits. We do this through our primary mission of program approval and our related efforts: compliance, oversight, training, liaison, and outreach. Indeed, with the exception of federal facilities, the State Approving Agencies are the sole authority responsible for the approval of all programs of education and training within the Nation. We take that responsibility seriously and consider ourselves the "gatekeepers of quality" for programs approved under the GI Bill.

Today, fifty-two SAAs in 50 states, as well as the District of Columbia and the territory of Puerto Rico (one state has two SAAs), composed of approximately 215 professional and support personnel, are supervising over 13,000 active facilities and nearly 220,000 programs. The Subcommittee is no stranger to our fundamental role as it is the same today as when we were created by Congress. SAAs work in collaboration with the VA and our other partners to promote and safeguard quality education and training programs for Veterans and other eligible persons *and* assist the VA in preventing fraud, waste, and abuse in the administration of the GI Bill. NASAA believes the primary responsibility and focus of the SAAs is, and should continue to be, to review, evaluate, and approve programs at schools and training facilities, utilizing state and federal criteria. It is this mission that underlies our comments today and upon which we base our concerns and suggestion.

H.R. 2830—"Veteran Improvement Commercial Driver License Act of 2023"

This legislation, while well meaning, causes NASAA great concern in its present form. As drafted, this bill sweeps away the protections provided for veterans under the two-year rule for private and not-for-profit educational institutions that do not offer a standard college degree (NCD institution). These educational institutions must be in existence for at least two years and approved by other necessary state regulatory authorities, such as a state department of education or state department of business licensure. The institution must also have successfully offered the pro-

gram for approval for that same period of time. This provision in essence, ensures that these institutions are committed to their mission long term, and have demonstrated success both programmatically and professionally. This is an important safeguard preventing an NCD institution, such as a truck driving school, from gaining approval without demonstrating a measure of quality and stability in its continuous operation.

This bill, as presently drafted, only requires that an institution offer the same curriculum as a previously SAA approved institution anywhere in the Nation. This, and having met the requirements for licensure within the state, are the only requirements for an exemption from the two-year rule. A truck driving school could request immediate approval of a “branch” campus anywhere in the nation, and the SAA of jurisdiction would have no records (graduation rate, CDL pass rate, or job placement) to determine the approvability of the program. SAAs view their role as the gatekeepers of quality, and the defenders of the integrity of the GI Bill. When we review a program for approval, particularly at a new location, curriculum is only one factor we review. We ensure that only programs that demonstrate quality educational outcomes for students are accepted, and do so through the review of instructor qualifications, administration, equipment, classrooms, and technical ability to administer the program. These factors can vary widely from one location to another (particularly from one state to another) and it is important, to determine program success, that we have some record of success to review and evaluate.

NASAA respectfully suggests that this legislation be amended so that the only institutions which may apply for any waiver from the requirements of the two-year rule are those within the same state as the initial campus upon which the institution bases its application to the SAA of jurisdiction. This means that one location must be approved in the state under the two-year rule before any branch campuses can be approved under any type of waiver. Also, we strongly suggest that the legislation provides that institutions must show a history of having provided the program at that location for a set period of time, 6 months to 1 year, or a set number of classes with at least 80 percent of graduates obtaining CDL licensure within one month of graduation.

NASAA opposes this bill in its present form.

H.R. –“Transparency for Student Veterans Act of 2023”.

This bill amends 3698 Comprehensive policy on providing information to veterans such that the information provided now includes median amount of debt from Title IV programs of education leading to a certificate or professional licensure at an approved Institution of Higher Learning. Likewise, the information provided to veterans and members of the Armed Forces will now include the rates at which veterans and active-duty members enroll after the first year (continuation rate) and the rates at which the graduate (completion rate) from both degree and certificate programs. The bill requires that veterans and service members also be provided the average annual salary for those who complete the approved program.

NASAA agrees that providing this data to prospective student veterans and service members allows them to make more informed choices about which school would be the best fit for them as well as ensuring they have better opportunities to complete their educational goals.

NASAA supports this bill.

H.R. 3816—“Veterans’ Entry to Apprenticeship Act”

This bill provides that Pre-Apprenticeship programs may be approved for GI Bill benefits and allows veterans to enroll in these programs as set forward with the requirements prescribed within the bill. While NASAA agrees with the purpose of this bill, we suggest that safeguards be added to protect veterans enrolled in these programs. First, we propose that only those pre-apprenticeship programs which are vocational in nature be considered for approval. In 2012, the US Department of Labor issued Training and Employment Notice 12–12, which outlines the definition of a quality Pre-Apprenticeship Program. NASAA believes that approval of any program for GI Bill benefits should meet these same standards as a metric of demonstrating quality training is occurring within the program. Likewise, we would like to see a requirement that these programs, to be approved, not only be required to demonstrate that the program will provide an individual with the skills and competencies needed to enroll in an apprenticeship program, but that they also demonstrate a record of success in placing veterans into a registered apprenticeship program at an acceptable rate for the industry involved (at least 80 percent) within six months of completion of the pre-apprenticeship program. Finally, pre apprenticeship graduates who move onto a full apprenticeship program must be granted prior credit and advanced standing by the apprenticeship program.

NASAA supports this bill with suggested amendments.

H.R. 5914—To amend title 38, United States Code, to improve the processes to approve programs of education for purposes of the educational assistance programs of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

This bill addresses the need for veterans to seamlessly access their hard-earned education benefits to facilitate a successful transition to civilian life. Sadly, some recent legislative mandates, particularly those requiring all educational institutions to provide individualized shopping sheets, while intended to provide transparency, have instead become, in some instances, an administrative burden preventing veterans from accessing their education benefits. Additionally, varying interpretations of rules and inconsistent guidance has caused a communication gap between Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) and School Certifying Officials (SCOs).

This legislation amends the requirement for a shopping sheet to state that SAAs will only disapprove programs when facilities fail to provide certain forms “to the maximum extent possible.” Also, this legislation requires a centralized communication platform for improved communication between VA and SCOs. NASAA believes this new language will address those issues by providing flexibility to institutions, such as police academies, truck driving schools and other approved NCD institutions, while still providing adequate safeguards for veterans and their families.

NASAA supports this bill.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, today, fifty-two SAAs, composed of approximately 215 professional and support personnel are supervising over 13,000 active facilities with almost 220,000 programs. We are extremely grateful for the opportunity to once again appear before this committee to share our positions on the important legislation before the Committee. We remain committed to working closely with our VA partners, VSO stakeholders and educational institutions on these and other initiatives designed to protect the quality and the integrity of the various GI Bill programs and the Veterans and family members who have sacrificed so much for this great Nation. I thank you again for this opportunity and I look forward to answering any questions that you or committee members may have.

Prepared Statement of Michael Hazard

Good afternoon, Chairman Van Orden and Members of the Committee. My name is Mike Hazard, and I am employed by the United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipe Fitting Industry of the United States and Canada (“UA”) as the Program Manager of the UA’s Veterans in Piping Training Program (“VIP Program”). I want to thank the Committee for giving me the opportunity today to share the success we’ve had at the UA VIP Program in helping transitioning service men and women prepare for a career in the plumbing and pipe-fitting industries, and to offer the UA’s views on several bills currently being considered by this Committee.

First, I would like to briefly share some information about my background and the important work we do at the UA VIP Program. I first joined the UA as a pipe tradesman in Santa Barbara, California in 1987. Soon after that, however, I placed my UA career on hold and joined the United States Navy, where I proudly served as an Aviation Rescue Swimmer and H-46 Helicopter Mechanic for 11 years.

I was honorably discharged from the Navy in 1999 while holding the rank of Petty Officer First Class.

Following my discharge from the Navy, I was able to pick up where I had left off at the UA and returned to work as a journeyman pipefitter. After working in the field for several years, I was offered and accepted a position as a Training Coordinator for a regional apprenticeship program in Southern California, where I facilitated plumbing and pipe fitting training for over 10,000 UA members. I was promoted to Executive Director of this training fund in 2008, which is the position I held until I accepted my current position at the UA in 2012.

In my current position, I manage the day-to-day operations of the nine UA VIP training sites located on seven military bases across the United States. Under the VIP program, the UA offers departing service men and women from all branches of the military the opportunity to participate in an intensive, eighteen-week training program on base which they receive at no cost to either the government or the student. The VIP Program offers courses in Fire Suppression, Pipe Fitting/Welding, and Heating, Ventilation, Air Conditioning and Refrigeration (HVAC-R). When

training is successfully completed, the graduates are guaranteed a job and are placed in one of the UA's best-in-class, "gold standard" apprenticeship programs with advanced credit toward the completion of their apprenticeship. Since its inception, I am proud to state that the UA VIP Program has provided apprenticeship opportunities to over 3,170 military veterans.

Data prepared by the Department of Labor shows that the average annual compensation received by the graduate of a registered apprenticeship program, included the UA training programs affiliated with the VIP Program, is significantly higher than the average annual earnings of an individual holding a Bachelor's or Associate's degree. The DOL also reports that 90 percent of individuals who complete a registered apprenticeship program retain their employment. These findings allow me to confidently say that the UA VIP Program is designed to place departing servicemembers on a path to a successful and sustainable career.

I know from my own personal experience how valuable it can be when transitioning back to civilian life to feel that an organization like the UA has your back. Reconnecting with my UA brothers and sisters and taking advantage of the work opportunities in this thriving industry certainly made the transition more manageable for me. It has therefore been deeply meaningful for me in my current position to be able to provide a similar experience to other veterans by connecting departing servicemembers with both the training opportunities and support systems provided by the UA VIP Program.

With this background behind me, I will now summarize the UA's views regarding several bills currently being considered by this Committee. First, the UA would like to express its strong support for several pending bills mentioned in the hearing invitation I received. These include H.R. 3601, the Student Veteran Work Modernization Act, H.R. 5190, the Military Family Protection from Debt Act, the draft bill proposing to modify the requirements of the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship, and the draft bill proposing to waive certain fees that are charged in connection with housing loans guaranteed by the Secretary of Veterans' Affairs.

Two of these bills—H.R. 3601 and the draft bill regarding the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship—will expand educational opportunities for departing servicemembers by expanding veteran eligibility for these important benefits. The other two bills I mentioned will help provide financial security to veterans and military families by waiving certain fees charged by the Department of Veteran Affairs in connection with housing loan guarantees provided by that agency, and by extending debt protections currently enjoyed by servicemembers and their spouses to other dependents of the servicemembers. These are measured, common-sense reforms that will provide tangible benefits to veterans and military families and which we believe can receive broad, bipartisan support.

On the other hand, I would also like to take this opportunity to express the UA's opposition to the draft bill titled "Consolidating Veteran Employment Services for Improved Performance Act of 2023." Broadly speaking, this bill would transfer the work performed by the VETs office at the Department of Labor to the Department of Veterans' Affairs. While I am sure this bill is well-intentioned, I believe that it is misguided and would not advance the interests of transitioning service members. The VA has a very important mission, but—unlike the DOL—job creation isn't typically understood as being a significant part of that mission. I therefore believe that the DOL is and should continue to be an important partner for the VA in providing training and employment opportunities to veterans.

I personally have been working with the DOL VETs office for 15 years, and during that time, I have consistently been impressed by the workforce development experts that are working there. These are individuals who take the time to actually go out and talk to veterans to learn more about their experiences and challenges. It has been my experience that, owing to the efforts of the VETs office, there is good cross-agency communication between the DOL, the VA, and the Department of Defense, and that the separate programs administered by these agencies are not unnecessarily siloed off. It is also my experience that the DOL VETs office plays an important role in connecting veterans with the apprenticeship programs that are also registered with the DOL. Therefore, I believe that changing the structure of the DOL VETs office in the manner proposed could result in much more harm than good, and I would therefore ask the Committee not to move forward on that particular effort.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the Committee again for this opportunity, and I am prepared to answer any questions the Members of the Committee may have for me.

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD

Prepared Statement of The American Legion



STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD
OF
THE AMERICAN LEGION

TO THE

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

ON

"PENDING AND DRAFT LEGISLATION"

NOVEMBER 2, 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

LEGISLATION	POSITION
H.R. 522 – Deliver for Veterans Act, pg. 2	Support
H.R. 2830 – Veterans Improvement Commercial Driver License Act, pg. 3	Support
H.R. 3601 – Student Veteran Work Study Modernization Act, pg. 4	Support
ANS to H.R. 3722 – Daniel J. Harvey, Jr. and Adam Lambert Improving Servicemember Transition to Reduce Veteran Suicide Act, pg. 5	Support
H.R. 3816 – Veterans’ Entry to Apprenticeship Act, pg. 6	Support
H.R. 5190 – Military Family Protection from Debt Act, pg. 7	Support
H.R. 5785 – Veterans in STEM Expansion Act, pg. 8	Support
H.R. 5913 – Consolidating Veteran Employment Services for Improved Performance Act of 2023, pg. 9	Oppose
H.R. 5914 – To amend title 38, United States Code, to improve the processes to approve programs of education for purposes of the educational assistance programs of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes, pg. 10	Support
H.R. 5965 – Transparency for Student Veterans Act of 2023, pg. 11	Support

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD OF
THE AMERICAN LEGION
TO THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
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November 2, 2023

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and distinguished members of this Subcommittee, on behalf of National Commander Daniel J. Seehafer and more than 1.6 million dues-paying members of The American Legion, we thank you for the opportunity to offer this statement for the record on pending and draft legislation.

The American Legion is directed by active Legionnaires who dedicate their time and resources to serve veterans, servicemembers, their families and caregivers. As a resolution-based organization, our positions are guided by more than 104 years of advocacy and resolutions that originate at the grassroots level of our organization. Every time The American Legion testifies, we offer a direct voice from the veteran community to Congress.

H.R. 522 – Deliver for Veterans Act

To amend title 38, United States Code, to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide or assist in providing a vehicle adapted for operation by disabled individuals to certain eligible persons, to pay expenses associated with the delivery of such vehicle, and for other purposes.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Automobile Adaptive Equipment (AAE) program provides adaptive vehicle equipment to allow Veterans to operate and enter/exit from their personal vehicles safely. Through the VA Driver's Rehabilitation Program, veterans are trained to operate these vehicles on our nation's roadways.¹ While the VA provides a one-time payment of \$23,255.72 for the adaptation of a motor vehicle, veterans who live outside the continental United States of America face additional financial challenges due to shipping costs. Despite many adaptations costing less than the one-time cap, current statutes prevent these funds from being applied to vehicle shipping. One example is veterans residing in Guam must pay significant shipping costs to have an adapted vehicle shipped.

H.R. 522, the *Deliver for Veterans Act*, would authorize VA to pay for the shipment of vehicles to disabled veterans no matter where they live, saving many veterans thousands of dollars. The American Legion believes these veterans should not be forced to pay for the adaptive equipment necessary to improve their mobility. The cost to ship adapted personal vehicles that will give some

¹ "Rehabilitation and Prosthetic Services - Automobile Adaptive Equipment (AAE)." U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. <https://www.prosthetics.va.gov/psas/AAE.asp>. Unless otherwise noted, all links accessed October 12, 2023.

semblance of personal independence and normalcy is a benefit this nation should provide to these wounded warriors.

Through Resolution No. 15: *Department of Veterans Affairs Prosthetic Program*, The American Legion supports innovation to ensure all veterans are provided opportunities to mobilize independently.²

The American Legion supports H.R. 522 as written.

H.R. 2830 – Veteran Improvement Commercial Driver License Act

To amend title 38, United States Code, to revise the rules for approval by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs of commercial driver education programs for purposes of veterans educational assistance, and for other purposes.

Many large commercial driver education programs offer training at multiple sites across the country. Under the current rules, each *individual* site must be approved by a State Approving Agency (SAA), even when every training site uses the identical curriculum. This requirement adds another administrative barrier for commercial driver programs to participate in Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) education assistance programs, which reduces access for veterans to this valuable training.

H.R. 2830, the *Veteran Improvement Commercial Driver License Act*, modifies the rules for the approval of commercial driver education programs for participation in VA education assistance programs. Specifically, commercial driver educational institutions with multiple training sites will be authorized to submit a single annual report to the VA, demonstrating an SAA-approved curriculum will be delivered at each training site. The VA will consult with the Department of Transportation to determine the legitimacy of the training provider through the Training Provider Registry of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) and determine approval for *all sites* of a commercial driver program. This solution will speed up the VA-approval process for these training programs.

The American Legion has worked closely with the Task Force Movement to bring industry leaders, private partners, veterans service organizations, and government officials together to find ways of reducing the truck driver shortage, including expanding opportunities to transitioning servicemembers, veterans, and spouses.³ It is estimated that 160,000 truck drivers will be needed in the United States to meet the demand over the next decade.⁴ If not remedied, this impending shortage will devastate supply chains across the country, result in delays of the shipment of goods and materials, and cause negative impacts to the economy. Approximately 250,000 servicemembers transition annually. These transitioning individuals and their spouses are potential

² The American Legion Resolution No. 16 (2017): *Department of Veterans Affairs Prosthetic Program*. <https://archive.legion.org/node/7907>

³ “National Education and Credentialing Summit Report.” The American Legion. 2022.

<https://www.legion.org/publications/257465/national-education-and-credentialing-summit-report>

⁴ “ATA Chief Economist Pegs Driver Shortage at Historic High.” American Trucking Associations (ATA). October 21, 2021. <https://www.trucking.org/news-insights/ata-chief-economist-pegs-driver-shortage-historic-high>

candidates for careers in the trucking industry. One way to make this opportunity more attractive to military-connected people is to create easily accessible training programs for careers in the trucking industry.

Improving access to education and training is key to gainful employment after military service. Reducing the red tape to obtain program approval from SAA and VA is necessary to improving access to training. Currently, more than 80,000 new credentialed truck drivers are needed to address the ballooning shortage.⁵ VA can streamline the approval process for driver training programs, providing more opportunities for veterans to earn their commercial driver license and sustain the American economy.

Through Resolution No. 318: *Ensuring the Quality of Servicemember and Veteran Student's Education at Institutions of Higher Education*,⁶ The American Legion supports any legislative proposal that improves access to education and training for veterans.

The American Legion supports H.R. 2830 as written.

H.R. 3601 – Student Veteran Work Study Modernization Act

To amend title 38, United States Code, to extend eligibility for a certain work-study allowance paid by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to certain individuals who pursue programs of rehabilitation, education, or training on at least a half-time basis, and for other purposes.

In its current form, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) work-study program helps Veterans earn an income while enrolled in a college, vocational school, or professional training program. To qualify for the work-study allowance, the student must be enrolled in their education or training program at least three-quarters of full-time, must be able to complete their work-study contract while they are eligible for their VA education benefits, and, finally, must use an approved VA education benefits program to pay for the education or training. If a student veteran meets these three prerequisites, they can participate in work-study at a VA facility or in a position related to VA and veterans.⁷ Although the program provides crucial financial support and professional experience to student veterans, these strict prerequisites limit the vocations veterans can pursue and the educational and professional programs in which veterans can enroll.

H.R. 3601, the *Student Veteran Work Study Modernization Act*, aims to ease the current prerequisites of the VA work-study program. The legislation will implement a five-year pilot program that expands eligibility for the work-study allowance program to students who are enrolled in education, training, and rehabilitation programs at least *half* of full-time, rather than three-quarters. The bill will require VA to submit a report to the House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committee detailing how many veterans participate in the improved work-study program, the

⁵ *The truck driver shortage in the US continues*. American Journal of Transportation. August 3, 2023. <https://www.ajot.com/news/the-truck-driver-shortage-in-the-us-continues>

⁶ The American Legion Resolution No. 318 (2016): *Ensuring the Quality of Servicemember and Veteran Student's Education at Institutions of Higher Education*. <https://archive.legion.org/node/470>

⁷ “Work Study.” U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. <https://www.va.gov/education/about-gi-bill-benefits/how-to-use-benefits/work-study/>

percentage of participants who receive a four-year degrees, and the number of participants who gain full-time employment at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The American Legion supports the modernization proposed in H.R. 3601 as crucial to veterans' quality of life while training for a career. Among the stressors experienced by transitioning servicemembers are the financial challenges of lost income, with nearly 3-in-5 struggling to make ends meet.⁸ Attending school full-time often precludes working full-time, and work-study programs offer veterans the chance to earn income while simultaneously pursuing their education..

Through Resolution No. 318: *Ensuring the Quality of Servicemember and Veteran Student's Education at Institutions of Higher Education*, The American Legion supports any legislative proposal that improves education opportunities for veterans.⁹

The American Legion supports H.R. 3601 as written.

Amendment in the Nature of a Substitute to H.R. 3722 – Daniel J. Harvey, Jr. and Adam Lambert Improving Servicemember Transition to Reduce Veteran Suicide Act

To require a pilot program on activities under the pre-separation transition process of members of the Armed Forces for a reduction in suicide among veterans, and for other purposes.

As hundreds of thousands of servicemembers transition from military service to civilian life each year, many struggle with finding adequate medical insurance and finding necessary medical and mental healthcare. The information provided in transition seminars is often insufficient or not specific enough to cover all veterans' various and diverse needs as they transition to the civilian sector. Many veterans have service-connected injuries and learning to navigate the complex Veterans Health Administration (VHA) can be nearly impossible while trying to find employment, relocate a family, and look for career training.¹⁰

The mandate set in the Affordable Care Act requires all citizens to have medical care insurance, and veterans have the option of enrolling in VHA to meet that requirement. However, enrollment has not been easy. The Solid Start Program (SSP) was rolled out in 2019, and was intended to contact and assist veterans with their enrollment in VHA and with finding medical and mental health services. However, SSP has been ineffective in its mandate due to the lack of VHA personnel and resources needed to staff the roles of liaisons and social workers to make this an effective, successful program.¹¹

⁸ "Annual Warrior Survey, Longitudinal: Wave 2." Wounded Warrior Project. 2022.

<https://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/media/vwhpx4h/wwp-2022-annual-warrior-survey-full-report.pdf>

⁹ The American Legion Resolution No. 318 (2016): *Ensuring the Quality of Servicemember and Veteran Student's Education at Institutions of Higher Education*. <https://archive.legion.org/node/470>

¹⁰ Britzky, Haley. "Military Veterans Can Now Receive Free Emergency Mental Health Care." CNN. January 17, 2023. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/17/politics/military-veterans-mental-health-care/index.html>.

¹¹ "Veterans Benefits: VA Could Enhance Outreach for Its Solid Start Program by Increasing Collaboration with Veterans Organizations." U.S. Government Accountability Office. 5 January 2023. GAO-23-105699. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-105699>.

This amendment in the nature of a substitute for H.R. 3722 would mandate that, within a year of passage, the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) would implement a pilot SSP program at no more than ten Department of Defense facilities that serve at least 300 military members. This program will allow VHA to reach servicemembers before separation, reducing the number of veterans without healthcare services, and easing the burden on veterans awaiting disability claims being processed by the VA. The American Legion believes that veterans shouldn't have to be the subject matter experts on healthcare systems. Earlier exposure to VHA liaisons will improve the delivery of these services. The American Legion believes that newly separated veterans, and veterans who are newly enrolled in the VHA, will benefit from the additional resources and support this bill offers.¹²

Through Resolution No. 11: *Automatic Enrollment into Veterans Affairs Health Care System*, The American Legion supports automatically enrolling eligible veterans into VA care, with the option to opt-out, upon transition from military service to reduce barriers to care and encourage help-seeking behavior.

The American Legion supports the Amendment in the Nature of a Substitute to H.R. 3722 as written.

H.R. 3816 – Veterans' Entry to Apprenticeship Act

To amend title 38, United States Code, to ensure that veterans may attend pre-apprenticeship programs using certain educational assistance provided by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

H.R. 3816, the *Veterans' Entry to Apprenticeship Act*, directs the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to treat pre-apprenticeship programs as apprenticeship programs for the purpose of providing GI Bill benefits. Funding assistance would equal the amount of an apprenticeship program, including the monthly housing allowance (MHA) under section 403 of title 37.

Pre-apprenticeships help individuals meet the entry requirements for Registered Apprenticeship programs and ensure they are prepared to succeed in a chosen career. A pre-apprenticeship program, by definition, has a documented partnership with at least one Registered Apprenticeship program. Quality pre-apprenticeship programs are a starting point toward a successful career path for under-represented job seekers (such as disadvantaged women and men, individuals with disabilities, and others) who may not be aware of this option to obtain jobs in critical industries with opportunities for advancement.

Currently, GI Bill education benefits do not cover the cost of Department of Labor-approved pre-apprenticeship programs, and veterans are not eligible for MHA in these programs. This creates financial barriers for veterans trying to gain qualifying training and credentials to enter high-demand industries.

¹² Brooks, Steven B. "VA Hoping to Get Newly Transitioning Veterans off to Solid Start." The American Legion. March 10, 2020. <https://www.legion.org/veteransbenefits/248533/va-hoping-get-newly-transitioning-veterans-solid-start>.

The American Legion has long supported pre-apprenticeship programs, such as the Department of Defense's SkillBridge program, that allow transitioning servicemembers and veterans to gain valuable experience to succeed in their Registered Apprenticeship programs. These programs support a strong American economy by providing skilled labor, manufacturing, infrastructure, cybersecurity, and healthcare professionals. Proposals such as the *Veterans' Entry to Apprenticeship Act* are not new. We first testified about this legislation before the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity in 2017,¹³ and it is past time for this common-sense legislation to be passed.

Through Resolution No. 25: *Support and Expand Apprenticeship Opportunities for Servicemembers*,¹⁴ The American Legion supports expanding apprenticeship opportunities across critical sectors, including manufacturing, infrastructure, cybersecurity, and health care.

The American Legion supports H.R. 3815 as written.

H.R. 5190 – Military Family Protection from Debt Act

To amend the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act to expand certain protections to dependents of members of the armed forces.

H.R. 5190, the *Military Family Protection from Debt Act*, would provide National Guard and Reserve servicemembers' dependents with the same interest rate protections that are applied to their sponsors' debts. By expanding the 6% interest rate cap to servicemembers' immediate family before or during active service, the *Military Family Protection from Debt Act* increases the financial readiness of the military and enhances national security capabilities.

In its current form, the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act (SCRA) protects servicemembers on active duty from interest rates of over 6% on debts incurred before their service begins, including car loans, student loans, and personal loans.¹⁵ The legislation was designed to limit the amount of financial stress on National Guard and Reserve members who lose their civilian employment when activated, often earning far less while in uniform, allows them to fully focus their attention on their service to our nation.¹⁶ However, the debt of servicemembers' dependents is not currently eligible for the interest rate cap, jeopardizing the financial readiness of servicemembers and their families.

Financial readiness of military families has been named a significant component of operational readiness by the Department of Defense (DOD). Unfortunately, a 2020 DOD report found that about 30% of active duty and reserve component servicemembers were not financially

¹³ Statement of John Kamin, The American Legion, before the House Veterans Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, on Pending and Draft Legislation. October 11, 2017. <https://archive.legion.org/node/7506>

¹⁴ The American Legion Resolution No. 25 (2018): *Support and Expand Apprenticeship Opportunities for Servicemembers*. <https://archive.legion.org/node/3437>

¹⁵ "The Servicemembers Civil Relief Act (SCRA)." Consumer Financial Protection Bureau.

https://files.consumerfinance.gov/f/documents/cfpb_vmyg-servicemembers-handout_sera-and-mla-protections.pdf

¹⁶ The Servicemembers Civil Relief Act (SCRA): Section-by-Section Summary. Updated June 5 2023 Congressional Research Service. R45283. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45283>

comfortable.¹⁷ Of those surveyed, junior enlisted and reserve component members reported the most financial instability and the least financially ready. While consumer protections provided by the SCRA help remedy the issue for single servicemembers, some military families are left with unprotected debt when a spouse or parent is called to active duty and must leave a well-paying civilian job. For this reason, the *Military Family Protection from Debt Act* is critical to ensuring both the financial well-being of military families and the operational readiness of the Armed Forces.

The American Legion recognizes the sacrifices made by military families and dependents during active duty. When one member of a family serves their country, their entire family serves as well. This legislation will relieve the financial burden of all who are called to the mission, ensuring that our military is relieved of undue burden and stress during their service to our nation.

Through Resolution No. 84: *Support and Strengthen Servicemembers Civil Relief Act (SCRA)*, The American urges Congress to pass legislation that protects servicemember and their dependents from excess interest rates that cause financial strain.¹⁸

The American Legion supports H.R. 5190 as written.

H.R. 5785 – Veterans in STEM Expansion Act

To amend title 38, United States Code, to modify the requirements of the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship.

The *Veterans in STEM Expansion Act* would remove burdensome requirements to access the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship and allow thousands of veterans to pursue degrees in STEM fields. As a provision of the *Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act*, the Edith Nourse Rogers Science Technology Engineering Math (STEM) Scholarship allows eligible Veterans to receive up to nine months of additional GI Bill benefits for training in high-demand fields. It was intended to provide veterans with additional educational benefits to complete their STEM program(s), which can often take longer to complete than traditional programs outside of the STEM fields.

To encourage widespread participation in this scholarship, Congress gave the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) the authority to authorize \$100 million in funding for fiscal year 2023 and each subsequent fiscal year.¹⁹ Unfortunately, participation in this program has not met these initial expectations. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that of more than 130,000 veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill to pursue a degree in STEM fields from 2019 to 2021, only 3,500 veterans used the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship program to extend their benefits

¹⁷ “Annual Report on the Financial Literacy and Preparedness of Members of the Armed Forces. December 2020.” Department of Defense. https://finred.usalearning.gov/assets/downloads/FINRED-2020_FinancialLiteracy-R.pdf

¹⁸ The American Legion Resolution No. 342 (2016): *Support and Strengthen the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act*. <https://archive.legion.org/node/490>

¹⁹ Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017, Pub. L. No. 115–48, Title I, §111, 131 Stat. 982 (2017). <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-115publ48/pdf/PLAW-115publ48.pdf>

due to many veterans not understanding the application process.²⁰ Of the maximum allowed expenditure of \$175 million during this time, less than \$58 million was used. More disturbingly, VA application data showed high rates of denial, especially among Black and female applicants.²¹

Currently, applications for the scholarship cannot be submitted until the student veteran has completed 60 semester credit hours and has 6 months of GI Bill benefits remaining, which is a very narrow window of eligibility. Also, the scholarship is currently available only to undergraduate STEM programs, further narrowing eligibility.

The *Veterans in STEM Expansion Act* removes some exclusions and expands veteran access to the Edith Nourse scholarship. This legislation adjusts the eligibility language in Section 3320 of title 38 to read, “45 standard semester (or 67.5 quarter) credit hours,” instead of the original language, which read “60 standard semester (or 90 quarter) credit hours.” This will provide more student veterans with time to plan their degree program to achieve their goals. Additionally, the bill opens eligibility for student veterans in graduate degree programs and for student veterans with more than six months of GI Bill eligibility remaining. We support this expansion of eligibility to more student veterans in STEM programs.

Through Resolution No. 318: *Ensuring the Quality of Servicemember and Veteran Student's Education at Institutions of Higher Education*,²² The American Legion supports any legislative proposal that improves access to education opportunities for veterans.

The American Legion supports H.R. 5785 as written.

H.R. 5913 – Consolidating Veteran Employment Services for Improved Performance Act of 2023

To amend title 38, United States Code, to improve employment services for veterans by consolidating various programs in the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

The *Consolidating Veteran Employment Services for Improved Performance Act of 2023* would transfer specified veteran-related programs of the Department of Labor (DOL) to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), effective October 1, 2025. These are programs pertaining to job counseling, training, placement services, federal government employment services, homeless veteran reintegration programs, and employment and veteran benefits training under the Transition Assistance Programs (TAP). The proposed legislation further directs the President of the United States to include funding for the VA in Fiscal Year 2027 and onwards. The draft bill establishes a Deputy Undersecretary for Veterans' Employment and Training to formulate all VA policies and procedures for these programs. Lastly, the bill consolidates VA disabled veterans' outreach program specialists and local veterans' employment representatives into a single provision, merging the two roles into a single position of veteran employment specialist.

²⁰ “VA Could Improve Support for Veterans Pursuing STEM Degrees.” U.S. Government Accountability Office. September 2022. GAO-22-105326. <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-22-105326.pdf>

²¹ Ibid

²² The American Legion Resolution No. 318 (2016): *Ensuring the Quality of Servicemember and Veteran Student's Education at Institutions of Higher Education*. <https://archive.legion.org/node/470>

The American Legion believes that the VA should continue to focus on our veterans' economic concerns and ensure that employment, education, and housing services meet the high standards of excellence that veterans deserve. While it is incumbent on VA to prioritize economic opportunity programs and initiatives, The American Legion has concerns about transferring DOL's Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS) to the VA. Having VETS under the DOL aligns with the broader mission of promoting and protecting the welfare of all American workers and job seekers. By retaining the VETS program in DOL, the federal government can provide a comprehensive approach to national workforce development and employment services, including those aimed at veterans. This will ensure veterans employment initiatives are kept in step with DOL's overarching national objectives.

Through Resolution No. 73: *Oppose the Transfer of Veterans' Employment and Training Service to the Department of Veterans Affairs*, The American Legion opposes all legislative or administrative efforts to transfer the Veterans' Employment and Training Service from the Department of Labor to the Department of Veterans Affairs.²³

The American Legion opposes H.R. 5913.

H.R. 5914

To amend title 38, United States Code, to improve the processes to approve programs of education for purposes of the educational assistance programs of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

In an effort to provide veterans with more information about education costs, Section 1018 of the *Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care And Benefits Improvement Act Of 2020* sets requirements for education institutions to submit financial forms to student veterans prior to their enrollment annotating projected financial costs of attendance. This requirement was modeled on the Department of Education's (ED) "College Financing Plan" (previously "Financial Aid Shopping Sheet"), a form that institutions voluntarily share with prospective students to provide simple and transparent information about costs and financial aid. This allows prospective students to easily compare institutions and make informed decisions about where to attend.²⁴

Unlike the ED's College Financing Plan, which applies only to degree-granting institutions, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) financial form is mandatory for all institutions who enroll GI Bill students. While traditional institutions of higher learning have reported little difficulty with providing data points such as the estimated cost of courses and the acceptance of transfer credits, non-degree-granting institutions such as law enforcement and Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) academies have not been able to fulfill the requirements outlined in Section 1018. These institutions are structured differently than academic universities and reportable data typically varies more than the standard financial forms. This situation inhibits the ability of some education

²³ The American Legion Resolution No. 73 (2016): *Oppose the Transfer of Veterans' Employment and Training to the Department of Veterans Affairs*. <https://archive.legion.org/node/320>

²⁴ The College Financing Plan. U.S. Department of Education. <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/highered/guid/aid-offer/index.html>

institutions to be certified by a School Certifying Official and unfortunately, GI Bill students are not able to enroll, reducing opportunities for veterans.

This draft legislation will amend current statutes to require these VA financial forms to be completed only “to the maximum extent practicable,” increasing the opportunity for more non-degree-granting institutions to comply with GI Bill reporting requirements and enroll GI Bill students. Law enforcement and EMT academies provide trained essential first-responders with many veterans interested in pursuing these public service careers. By easing the reporting requirements for these institutions, more veterans will have access to these careers.

The American Legion supports legislation to improve educational assistance, including advocating for greater educational opportunities. Improving the School Certifying Official approval process to establish additional opportunities for service-minded veterans and their desire to have a positive effect in their communities.

Through Resolution No. 327: *Support Further Assessment and Evaluation of Institutions of Higher Learning to Enable Veterans to Make Informed Education Choices*, The American Legion supports effective legislation evaluating education institutions on quality factors, such as, but not limited to, accreditation, transferability, cost, graduation rates, and acceptance in the job market.²⁵

The American Legion supports H.R. 5914 as currently written.

H.R. 5965 – Transparency for Student Veterans Act of 2023

To amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide additional information about certain postsecondary educational institutions to individuals entitled to educational assistance under the laws administered by such Secretary.

The *Transparency for Student Veterans Act of 2023* is designed to increase the visibility of data on training and education institutions for veterans entitled to VA education benefits. H.R. 5965 ensures that programs of education leading to a certificate or professional license are required to provide information on the rates at which veterans re-enroll after completing their first year, the number of veterans or members who completed an education which led to a degree (specifying type of degree, e.g., associates, bachelors, postbaccalaureate), the certificate or professional license obtained (specifying type of certificate or license), the average time to completion (leading to a degree, certificate, or professional license), and the average annual salary of those who complete their education.

Access to these quality factors is vital to making informed decisions. The GI Bill is an earned benefit that should be utilized to the maximum extent possible. Without access to information that demonstrates the legitimacy of academic institutions, veterans are at risk of making poor decisions. H.R. 5965 will allow veterans to determine if the institution that they are considering will provide them with the return on investment they both desire and deserve.

²⁵ The American Legion Resolution No. 327 (2016): *Support Further Assessment and Evaluation of Institutions of Higher Learning to Enable Veterans to Make Informed Education Choices*. <https://archive.legion.org/node/475>

Data on veterans' outcomes in higher education has been under-reported and under-shared for far too long. There is also an unfortunate history of veterans being taken advantage of by predatory academic institutions. In some cases, academic institutions purposely withhold quality factors—to entice veterans into enrolling in their programs. Legislation like the *Transparency for Student Veterans Act of 2023* is crucial to veterans' academic and future economic success by ensuring full transparency of quality data from all training and education institutions who enroll student veterans. The American Legion testified on similar draft legislation in 2020, specifically regarding the GI Bill Comparison tool, and will continue to advocate for legislation that ensures veterans are fully empowered to choose their best-suited academic and professional paths.

Through Resolution No. 327: *Support Further Assessment and Evaluation of Institutions of Higher Learning to Enable Veterans to Make Informed Education Choices*, The American Legion supports effective legislation evaluating education institutions on quality factors, such as, but not limited to, accreditation, transferability, cost, graduation rates, and acceptance in the job market.²⁶

The American Legion supports this H.R. 5965 as written.

Conclusion

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and distinguished members of the subcommittee; The American Legion thanks you for your leadership and for allowing us the opportunity to submit the positions of our 1.6 million members on the importance of these pieces of proposed legislation. Questions concerning this testimony can be directed to John Kamin at 202-263-5748, or jkamin@legion.org.

²⁶ The American Legion Resolution No. 327 (2016): *Support Further Assessment and Evaluation of Institutions of Higher Learning to Enable Veterans to Make Informed Education Choices*. <https://archive.legion.org/node/475>

Prepared Statement of Veterans Education Project

October 20, 2023

The Honorable Derrick Van Orden
U.S. House of Representatives
1513 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

As Veterans serving Veterans, the Veterans Education Project (VEP) fully supports Rep. Van Orden's suggested change to title 38 of the United States Code. VEP has a long running track record for calling for greater transparency and accountability for both institutions and the government agencies that regulate them. This policy change will shed light on the exact policies and regulations we expect institutions to follow and uphold. This transparency will not only help the public hold schools to account but also help institutions be clear on what they need to provide to School Certifying Officials (SCOs) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) which has been historically confusion and wrought with miscommunications.

VEP also supports the change to section 3679 of title 38 which would give schools the chance to meet an ever-changing landscape of regulations without the fear of sudden loss of eligibility anytime a policy changes. While VEP supports rigorous standards and accountability we also do not want to see student veterans suddenly lose the ability to use their benefits at their chosen school simply due to burdensome administrative requirements that could be easily resolved in a timely manner.

Thank you for your leadership on this issue and we stand ready to provide any further perspective from Student Veterans you may need.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stephen Patterson', is positioned above the printed name.

Stephen Patterson
Executive Director
Veterans Education Project

Prepared Statement of Veterans Education Success

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and Members of the Subcommittee:

We thank you for the opportunity to share this statement for consideration during this hearing, which includes many notable bills addressing topics in higher education and veterans education benefits. Veterans Education Success is a nonprofit organization with the mission of advancing higher education success for veterans, service members, and military families, and protecting the integrity and promise of the GI Bill and other federal education programs.

In this statement, we address the following legislative proposals: Transparency for Student Veterans Act, draft language on the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship, draft language on a repository of guidance from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Expanding Access for Online Veteran Students Act, and a proposal to establish the Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration at VA.

We applaud the Subcommittee's dedication to our Nation's veterans, and look forward to working closely with the staff members on the advancement of many of these important topics for broader consideration.

H.R.—, Transparency for Student Veterans Act

This bill would require VA to disclose additional information about schools to prospective student veterans, including data specifically about veterans and service members who used VA educational assistance. This would include data such as retention and completion rates, average length of time for obtaining a credential, and average annual salary. The bill also modifies the median debt calculation to include the debt associated with certificate/professional licensure programs.

The bill would also direct VA to work with other federal agencies to obtain outcomes information for students eligible for veterans educational benefits. We have been long-time champions of providing student veterans with the necessary information and resources to make the most of their earned benefits and advance their career goals.¹

From a technical standpoint, we would like to offer some feedback for consideration regarding how the term "covered education" is used in the text. "Covered education" is defined with reference to 38 U.S.C. § 3691A, which provides that "covered education" is "a course of education (A) at an institution of higher education; and (B) paid with educational assistance furnished under a law administered by the Secretary." Requesting data for "covered education" might include individuals who used VA benefits for only a portion of their education.

An individual may not have sufficient educational assistance to pay for their entire education and may use VA educational assistance to pay for only a portion of their education. Some of the data points do not seem to consider this possibility, which may lead to confusion and inaccurate information being provided. For example, the data point on the rate at which veterans and service members "complete covered education" could be interpreted in two ways: 1. The rate at which veterans complete a degree that is completely paid with VA educational assistance; 2. The rate at which they complete the portion of their degree that is paid with VA educational assistance. We think the current text of this bill is ambiguous on which interpretation would be correct and could result in VA providing the incorrect data.

Similarly, the data points on the "average length of time" for a veteran "to complete covered education at the institution" would seem to include the periods when only a portion of the education is paid with VA educational assistance. Unless the data points are clarified, the bill could lead VA to generate misleading information about the success rate of veterans in completing their education.

Despite these technical considerations, we offer our support for the intent of this legislation, and hope to work with Congress to advance this measure.

H.R. 3601, Student Veteran Work Study Modernization Act

The bill institutes a five-year pilot program that would expand the existing provisions related to the work-study program for students under the Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) program. Currently, individuals must be pursuing programs at a rate of at least three-quarters of a full-time student. The pilot program would expand it to individuals pursuing a program at a rate of half of a full-time

¹ Veterans Education Success, "Statement for the Record Submitted to the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs 118th Congress, First Session – Veterans Education Success," Veterans Education Success, April 24, 2023, <https://vetsedsuccess.org/statement-for-the-record-submitted-to-the-senate-committee-on-veterans-affairs-118th-congress-first-session/>.

student. The bill also institutes a reporting requirement and references how to determine the budgetary effects.

We recognize the importance and value of the work-study program available through VA for student veterans to supplement their income while pursuing their training and education goals. We support extending this program to VR&E students to afford them opportunities to engage in activities supporting their income, and we support this legislation.

H.R.—, To amend title 38, United States Code, to modify the requirements of the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship

This bill would make several changes to the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM scholarship to make the scholarship more accessible to student veterans intending to make use of the program, including:

- Expand the list of eligible degrees to include graduate degrees.
- Lower the number of credit hours required to qualify for the scholarship.
- Add new priority groups for students who have used the most months of assistance and students pursuing a qualifying post-secondary degree.

Expanding the list of eligible degrees to include graduate degrees would provide additional flexibility in the program, but should be monitored to ensure that utilization by officers for graduate studies does not come at the expense of enlisted seeking undergraduate degrees. One technical issue is that the credit hour requirement in the current statute (38 USC § 3320(B)(3)(a)(i)) may need to be revised to include graduate programs.

We also believe that lowering the number of completed credit hours required to qualify for the scholarship would increase participation. However, we encourage the Subcommittee to consider readdressing these changes if future utilization rates balance significantly in favor of graduate students and officers, as they are not the original target audience of the program.

Finally, adding new priority groups for students who have used the most months of assistance and students pursuing a qualifying post-secondary degree would ensure that the scholarship is awarded to students who are most in need of financial assistance.

We support the passage of this legislation, and look forward to working with the Committee on this bill.

H.R.—, To amend title, United States Code, to improve the processes to approve programs of education for purposes of the educational assistance programs of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes;

The bill proposes changes related to consumer information requirements for schools, and the establishment of a website for school certifying official (SCO) training information by VA. Section 1(a) reduces the requirement that schools provide certain consumer information to prospective students by inserting “to the maximum extent practicable.” Section 1(b) requires VA to establish a website for publishing information about SCO training the Department provides.

Section 1(a). Currently under 38 U.S.C. § 3679(f)(1)(A), schools risk losing VA approval if they do not provide individuals with a form containing certain information before enrollment.² These disclosures include reasonable and necessary information for student veteran decision-making, including:

- The estimated total cost of the course, including tuition, fees, books, supplies, and any other additional costs;
- An estimate of the cost for living expenses for students enrolled in the course;
- The amount of the costs under clauses (i) and (ii) that are covered by the educational assistance provided to the individual under chapter 30, 31, 32, 33, or 35 of this title, or chapter 1606 or 1607 of title 10, as the case may be;
- The type and amount of Federal financial aid not administered by the Secretary and financial aid offered by the institution that the individual may qualify to receive;
- An estimate of the amount of student loan debt the individual would have upon graduation;
- Information regarding graduation rates;
- Job-placement rates for graduates of the course, if available;

² 38 U.S.C. § 3679 (2023). <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/38/3679>.

- Information regarding the acceptance by the institution of transfer of credits, including military credits;
- Any conditions or additional requirements, including training, experience, or examinations, required to obtain the license, certification, or approval for which the course of education is designed to provide preparation; and
- Other information to facilitate comparison by the individual of aid packages offered by different educational institutions.

The bill modifies the schools' obligations in Section 3679(f)(1)(A) by inserting that the information is provided only "to the maximum extent practicable." However, "to the maximum extent practicable" is a subjective and yielding standard that would make the disclosures essentially unenforceable, removing an important protection for veterans. We believe that the information currently required is necessary for veterans to make the best decision about where to spend their hard-earned GI Bill benefits.

Inserting the phrase "to the maximum extent practicable" seems to elevate the convenience of the schools above the interests of the veterans and could result in student veterans generally being denied important information. Further, without a firm obligation to provide the information, bad actors may seize the opportunity to withhold critical information and mislead student veterans into enrolling in a program.

Clearly the information in Section 3679 is information student veterans would benefit from before they decide to enroll in a school. VA-approved schools should continue to be required to provide the information, as it is all information that should be known to the schools. If there were a specific piece of information that schools widely are unable to provide for reasons outside of their control, then updating the statute to address that specific disclosure would be a more precise course of action. We oppose Section 1(a) of the bill.

Section 1(b). In a recent Economic Opportunity Subcommittee hearing, it became abundantly clear that there is a lack of access to historical guidance from VA's Education Service Office.³ We believe all guidance from VA, including historical notices, is highly valuable – and indeed, extremely necessary – for SCOs to access.

Like any role on campus, the SCO function is subject to turnover in personnel, so having a consolidated and accurate repository of this information would afford additional continuity on campus, and support the overall administration of education benefits. In addition to SCOs, university officials, veterans advocates, and Congress would all benefit from greater transparency and access to this information. We fully support this section of the bill, and would be eager to advocate in favor of advancing this section of the legislation.

H.R. 5702, Expanding Access for Online Veteran Students Act

The bill would increase the housing allowance for solely online students attending a summer course less than 12 weeks, giving them a housing allowance *equal to the national average*.

We believe the significant federal costs of increasing MHA for online-only students should not be the top spending priority for the Subcommittee, given existing and more compelling unmet needs of veterans. We urge the Subcommittee to set aside this bill and instead prioritize issues such as veterans who need GI Bill Parity for Guard and Reserve service, Survivors and Dependents Chapter 35 improvements, and restoring the GI Bill for defrauded student veterans.

On the substance, the bill brings serious adverse consequences for veterans. We believe that a common principle we can collectively agree to is the desire to support veterans and their families. In doing so, we further believe it is important to consider the second and third order effects of these policies, and to anticipate their adverse unintended consequences. In this instance, we strongly caution Congress about such a shift in policy, and recommend considering the following associated impacts:

- **Incentivizing Students to Leave Flagship Public Universities.** This bill would incentivize veterans to leave high-quality, flagship public universities in low-housing cost states – such as Arizona, Indiana, Kentucky, South Carolina, and Wisconsin – to attend lower-quality online-only college chains due to the housing allowance being higher. Current housing

³U.S. House of Representatives Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity. Oversight Hearing, "Less is More: The Impact of Bureaucratic Red Tape on Veterans Education Benefits," (September 20, 2023, <https://veterans.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=6258>).

allowance rates for in-person and hybrid learners are based on the Department of Defense's (DOD) housing allowance rates (BAH) for an "E-5 with dependents."⁴ DOD recognizes 339 different housing allowance zones. Over sixty percent of these DOD BAH zones have housing costs less than the national average. In some of the least expensive zones, the housing allowance is one-half the national average.⁵ Student veterans in 206 zones would receive more housing allowance by attending an online-only school.

Even if this bill limits the timeframe to the summer term, a potential increase of \$3,000 or more would be a powerful economic factor for students to incentivize students to switch to a solely online college. Furthermore, veterans switching from public colleges and universities to online-only college chains would receive a lower-quality education. The existing unbiased research regarding distance learning has documented better outcomes for in-person education when compared to online education.⁶ Certainly, more investigation is needed before Congress acts to prioritize online programs and incentivize student veterans to attend online colleges.

- **Marketing Tool for Bad Actors.** Low-quality and predatory schools would use the availability of an increased housing allowance as a selling point to target veterans to attend predatory and exploitative programs. In the aftermath of having finally closed the 90/10 loophole, a shift to a full housing allowance for solely online colleges would re-establish veterans as a target for unscrupulous schools; many of these schools have been sued by law enforcement and fined by federal agencies for defrauding students, and can reasonably be expected to abuse this change.⁷
- **Increasing Overall Costs.** We believe that much of the potential enrollment shift incentivized by the higher housing allowance would be from low-tuition public institutions to high-tuition private ones, driving up costs not only for VA, but also for the very students veterans that the bill seeks to help. Much of our work with veterans seeking our support involves speaking with former students who were recruited through high-pressure sales tactics. These students were often led to believe that their GI Bill benefits would cover all costs, only to find themselves heavily in debt as the schools exhausted their benefits and forced them to borrow.
- **Undermining the Rationale for Online Education.** Such a change would also undermine the original intent of Congress that established a lower housing allowance for solely online study as being meant to accommodate the additional employment flexibility and convenience that distance education is intended to provide non-traditional students.⁸ Entirely online courses are typically designed to allow students to continue working while enrolled. The lower housing allowance provided to solely online students therefore reflects this central distinction from in-person students; setting it at the same or greater rate as for in-person students would overlook meaningful differences in expenses and opportunity costs incurred by students enrolled in the two distinct modes of delivery.

At the onset of the COVID public health emergency, when many institutions had to move their classes online, we supported the Veterans' Affairs Committees' work to change the housing policy to allow students enrolled in online courses to continue to receive 100 percent of their residential monthly housing allowance.⁹ This temporary policy was intended to accommodate the significant additional housing costs

⁴U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "Post-9/11 GI Bill (Chapter 33): How does VA determine my monthly housing allowance (MHA)?" (2023), www.va.gov/education/about-gi-bill-benefits/post-9-11/#how-does-va-determine-my-month.

⁵Defense Travel Management Office, "Basic Allowance for Housing Rate Lookup," (2023) <https://www.travel.dod.mil/allowances/basic-allowance-for-housing/bah-rate-lookup/>.

⁶See, e.g., Stephanie Riegg Cellini, Brookings Institution, "How Does Virtual Learning Impact Students in Higher Education" (Aug. 13, 2021), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2021/08/13/how-does-virtual-learning-impact-students-in-higher-education/>.

⁷*People of the State of California v. Ashford University, et.al.*, 37-2018-00046134-CU-MC-CTL, Statement of Decision (hereinafter, "Order"), filed March 3, 2022, available at https://oag.ca.gov/system/files/attachments/press-docs/37-2018-00046134-CU-MC-CTL_KROA-696_03-03-22_Statement_of_Decision_1646669688827.pdf.

⁸U.S. Senate Report 111-346, "POST-9/11 VETERANS EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANCE IMPROVEMENTS ACT OF 2010," (2010), <https://www.Congress.gov/congressional-report/111th-congress/senate-report/346/1>.

⁹Public Law 116-140, "Student Veteran Coronavirus Response Act of 2020," 116th Congress, 2nd Session, (2020) <https://www.Congress.gov/116/plaws/publ140/PLAW-116publ140.pdf>.

that in-person students had already incurred when the pandemic forced them to go online.

At the time, Congress chose not to complicate its effort to provide relief to such students by making distinctions between those student veterans who were already enrolled entirely online versus those who were forced into online delivery due to the pandemic. This, despite the fact that it was always understood that students enrolled in in-person courses were incurring additional housing and opportunity costs not incurred by online students.

Today, colleges are back in-person, and proper policy should revert to status quo ante by acknowledging the higher housing costs incurred by students attending in-person. We urge the Subcommittee not to move forward with this legislation. We believe a near-term solution would be for Congress to direct the execution of an unbiased study of online learning outcomes as it pertains to Title 38 veterans education benefits.

H.R. 3738, To amend title 38, United States Code, to establish in the Department of Veterans Affairs the Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration, and for other purposes

This measure proposes the creation of a “Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration” within VA, overseen by a new Under Secretary. The purpose of this new Administration would be to manage and administer various programs focused on delivering economic opportunity benefits to veterans and their dependents and survivors. The bill would also require the Secretary to provide an annual report to Congress on the programs administered by the Under Secretary for Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition.

Various versions of this legislation have been proposed over more than the past decade. Notably, several iterations of this proposal have passed the House of Representatives, but none has been successful in passing the Senate.¹⁰ One previous sticking point had been the inclusion of a provision which would have moved the U.S. Department of Labor (DoL) Veterans’ Employment and Training Service (VETS) program under the proposed new Administration within VA. This current legislation makes no such proposal.

Historical support for various iterations of this legislation have included the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), Disabled American Veterans (DAV), Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA), American Veterans (AMVETS), Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA), and Student Veterans of America (SVA).¹¹ The concept has also been previously endorsed in the annual Independent Budget produced by DAV, PVA, and VFW.¹² We believe this support stems from the overall recognition that the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) continues to struggle in its competing missions of delivering disability compensation benefits and a wide variety of economic opportunity benefits such as the GI Bill.

In 2018, VBA established the Office of Transition and Economic Development (TED), now referred to as Outreach, Transition and Economic Development (OTED), in response to previous proposals similar to this legislation.^{13, 14} The establishment of that office represented an acknowledgement that VBA had been structurally unprepared to respond to the modern needs of veterans when it comes to transition and economic opportunity. We believe much of the office is geared toward transition more so than economic opportunity and tools of empowerment such as the GI Bill.¹⁵

¹⁰ Six iterations of this legislation have been proposed over the past 15 years, including H.R. 2494 (117th Congress), H.R. 2045 (116th Congress), H.R. 5644 (115th Congress), H.R. 2327 (113th Congress), H.R. 2481 (113th Congress), and H.R. 3719 (111th Congress); on three occasions, the legislation passed the U.S. House of Representatives unanimously, including H.R. 2494, 2045, and 2481. <https://www.Congress.gov/>.

¹¹ Hubbard, William, “Testimony of Mr. William Hubbard, Chief of Staff, Student Veterans of America,” Apr. 30, 2019, <https://www.Congress.gov/116/meeting/house/109320/witnesses/HHRG-116-VR10-Wstate-HubbardW-20190430.pdf>.

¹² Independent Budget, <https://www.independentbudget.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/TIB-EAE1-Create-an-Economic-Opportunity-Administration-Within-The-Department-of-Veteran-Affairs-VA.pdf>.

¹³ Devlin, Margarita, “Statement of Margarita Devlin, Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Benefits, Veterans Benefits Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs, before the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity,” Apr. 9, 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/109258/witnesses/HHRG-116-VR10-Wstate-DevlinM-20190409.pdf>.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, “Outreach, Transition and Economic Development,” <https://benefits.va.gov/transition/index.asp>.

¹⁵ Rawls, Cheryl, “Statement of Ms. Cheryl Rawls, Executive Director, Outreach, Transition and Economic Development Service Department of Veterans Affairs before the Subcommittee on

Despite the existence of this office for the past five years, significant barriers remain when it comes to economic opportunity for veterans. Delays in benefits distribution occurred recently and raise questions about broader systemic issues.^{16, 17} Veterans should never be exposed to doubt whether or not they will be able to pay rent in a given month.

Furthermore, VA's attention to implementing critical consumer protection laws has been inconsistent, or entirely lacking in certain instances, over the past several decades. For example, VA's inadequate implementation of 38 U.S.C. 3696 prevents GI Bill beneficiaries from making an informed choice when deciding where to use their hard-earned benefits, and undermines the integrity of the GI Bill by allowing schools that engage in fraud to receive taxpayer support.

Even more troubling, schools including Alta (Westwood College), Corinthian, ITT, and former EDMC brands (Argosy, Art Institutes, South University) which engaged in deceptive advertising and enrollment tactics have closed precipitously, leaving beneficiaries without a degree after having wasted some or all of their benefits.¹⁸ We remain deeply concerned about the continued ability of predatory schools to defraud veterans out of their hard-earned GI Bill benefits. More recent examples of failing to provide adequate responses have included:

- **House of Prayer.** Last summer, the public widely learned about the shocking allegations associated with a system of schools misleadingly called House of Prayer Christian Church.¹⁹ This case culminated in a raid by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, a case we had reported to VA over 2 years prior.^{20, 21}
- **Perdoceo.** In 2021, we alerted VA to law enforcement's concerns about the Perdoceo Education Corporation, formerly known as the Career Education Corporation, encompassing American Intercontinental University, Colorado Technical University, California Southern University, and Trident University International.²² Despite calling VA's attention to enforcement actions and investigations by Federal and State authorities, these schools remain eligible for GI Bill funding. In 2019, 36 veterans and military service organizations wrote to VA over similar concerns, and despite years of community-wide concerns, no meaningful action has been taken to date.²³
- **School Closures.** In August 2021, we wrote a memorandum to VA to establish our concern over the language on its GI Bill Restoration Page.^{24, 25} Under the VETS Credit Act, veterans simply have to sign a

Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs Committee on Veterans' Affairs U.S. House of Representatives," Feb. 8, 2022, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR09/20220208/114386/HHRG-117-VR09-Wstate-RawlsC-20220208-U1.pdf>.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "Important Update About GI Bill Monthly Payments for Students," Mar. 31, 2023, <https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/USVAVBA/bulletins/3522215>.

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "Update on Post 9/11 GI Bill MHA Delayed Payment for March 2023," Apr. 19, 2023, <https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/USVAVBA/bulletins/355e1e1>.

¹⁸ Veterans Education Success, "VA Still Not Enforcing 1974 Ban on Schools that Engage in Deceptive Advertising and Recruiting," Oct. 2019, <https://vetsedsuccess.org/va-still-not-enforcing-1974-ban-on-schools-that-engage-in-deceptive-advertising-and-recruiting/>.

¹⁹ Beynon, Steve and Novelly, Thomas. "How a Church Allegedly Scammed Millions in VA Money from Vets," Military.com, Jul. 19, 2022, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2022/07/19/how-church-allegedly-scammed-millions-va-money-vets.html>.

²⁰ Koch, Alexandra, "FBI raids Georgia churches near military bases, sources say church was targeting soldiers," USA Today, Jun. 24, 2022, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2022/06/24/fbi-raids-house-prayer-churches/7724801001/>.

²¹ Veterans Education Success, "Our Letter to VA and Georgia SAA Regarding House of Prayer Christian Church," Aug. 1, 2020, <https://vetsedsuccess.org/letter-to-va-and-georgia-saa-regarding-house-of-prayer-christian-church/>.

²² Veterans Education Success, "Summary of Veteran and Servicemember Student Complaints about Perdoceo Education Corporation," September 1st, 2021, <https://vetsedsuccess.org/summary-of-veteran-and-servicemember-student-complaints-about-perdoceo-education-corporation/>.

²³ Letter from Veterans and Military Service Organizations to the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Feb. 14, 2019, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/556718b2e4b02e470eb1b186/t/5c6db4db1905f4690dd06f6f/1550693596300/VSO+Letter+to+VA+Secretary-1.pdf>.

²⁴ Hubbard, William, "Memorandum From William Hubbard to Department of Veterans Affairs on Changes to VBA Webpage," Aug. 17, 2021, <https://vetsedsuccess.org/memorandum-from-william-hubbard-to-department-of-veterans-affairs-on-changes-to-vba-webpage/>.

²⁵ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "Restoration of Benefits After School Closure or if a School is Disapproved for GI Bill Benefits," <https://www.benefits.va.gov/GIBILL/Restoration.asp>. Updated March 15, 2023.

declaration that they understand that if they transfer 12 or more credits they are ineligible to receive their full GI Bill restoration.²⁶ Despite this new law, VA continues to present logistical hurdles for veterans to use the benefits they earned.

- **FastTrain and Retail Ready Career Center.** It is unacceptable that veterans should have to wonder why obvious scams like *FastTrain College* and *Retail Ready Career Center* were approved in the first place.²⁷ The VA's statutes governing program approval are seriously outdated, referencing classes taught "by radio," and they continue to allow a low standard of entry. Veterans should be able to count on VA's "stamp of approval" as the level of quality they – and taxpayers – expect.

Our testimony is in no way intended to take away from the incredible work of the many hardworking VBA teams. In fact, quite the opposite. We believe these teams should be further empowered to achieve even greater success, and have seen that the current system in place does not set up for maximum success the dedicated staff of VBA. When these professionals are provided with the full opportunity to succeed, the end result is a more reliable and higher quality set of opportunities for the ultimate customer of VA: our Nation's veterans.

It's possible a new Administration and Under Secretary could help to address these issues, though the premise remains untested. We encourage this Committee and Congress to heavily deliberate over the long-term implications of continuing with the current system, which is clearly inadequate. We believe this legislation is worth serious consideration and debate, so there may be progress toward providing all veterans with quality programs they deserve.

Conclusion

Veterans Education Success sincerely appreciates the opportunity to express our views before this Subcommittee. We look forward to the discussion and review of these proposals, and we are grateful for the continued opportunities to collaborate on these topics.

Information Required by Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, Veterans Education Success has not received any federal grants in fiscal year 2023, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.

²⁶ Veterans Education Success, Our Press Release: Senate Passes Important "VETS Credit Act" Unanimously, Bill Heads to the President for Signature," <https://vetsedsuccess.org/our-press-release-senate-passes-important-vets-credit-act-unanimously-bill-heads-to-the-president-for-signature/>.

²⁷ Ayala, Eva-Marie, "Hundreds of veterans scramble after Garland for-profit college closes," The Dallas Morning News, Sep 28, 2017, <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/education/2017/09/28/hundreds-of-veterans-scramble-after-garland-for-profit-college-closes/>.

Prepared Statement of Commercial Vehicle Training Association



October 17, 2023

The Honorable Derrick Van Orden
 Chairman
 Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
 Committee on Veterans' Affairs
 U.S. House of Representatives
 364 Cannon House Office Building
 Washington, DC 20024

Chairman Van Orden,

We are writing to share our support for H.R. 2830, the *Veteran Improvement Commercial Driver License Act of 2023*.

H.R. 2830 is commonsense legislation that will reduce barriers that veterans face in getting high-quality training for good paying truck driving careers. Because of their extensive training, exceptional professionalism, and mission-focused approach, veterans are ideal candidates for the trucking workforce. The relief provided under this bipartisan proposal will give veterans additional choices when seeking out professional truck driving careers.

The Commercial Vehicle Training Association (CVTA) is the largest association of truck driver training programs in the U.S. CVTA's membership includes nearly 100 member schools with 400 training locations in 46 states. CVTA schools train the largest collective source of entry-level truck drivers in the nation, instructing 100,000 new Commercial Motor Vehicle (CMV) drivers each year.

The professional truck driver training programs provided by CVTA's membership equip students with the skills they need to earn their Commercial Driver's License (CDL) and succeed in the workforce. CVTA schools strive to provide students with training that surpasses federal minimum training requirements for entry-level truck drivers. Owing to that, CVTA member schools maintain hiring relationships with leading national motor carriers that allow their students to garner job offers immediately upon completion of their training.

Truck driver training sets people on the path towards a rewarding career. Truck driving jobs had median wages of \$55,000 to \$85,000 in 2021, according to a compensation survey conducted by the American Trucking Associations (ATA).¹ At least three-in-four carriers surveyed by ATA offered employment benefits including paid holidays, paid leave, health insurance, and retirement plans.

Truck driver training also helps support critical functions of the nation's supply chain. The trucking industry faced a shortage of nearly 78,000 drivers in 2022, according to ATA analysis. In total, the

¹ American Trucking Associations, "2022 Driver Compensation Study: Advanced Executive Summary," June 30, 2022, https://ata.msgfocus.com/files/amf_highroad_solution/project_2358/ATA_2022_Driver_Compensation_Study_-_Press_Executive_Summary.pdf

industry will have to recruit nearly 1.2 million new drivers over the next decade to replace retiring drivers, drivers who leave the industry, and to keep pace with industry growth.²

CVTA members are proud to provide high-quality training and career opportunities to people who return home after serving our nation.³ Passage of H.R. 2830 will provide meaningful support and will assist CVTA members in continuing to meet that honorable responsibility.

We respectfully ask that members of this committee support this important proposal.

Sincerely,



Jerome Redmond
Chairman
Commercial Vehicle Training Association



Andrew Poliakoff
Executive Director
Commercial Vehicle Training Association

² American Trucking Associations (ATA), "Driver Shortage Update 2022," October 25, 2022, https://ata.msgfocus.com/files/amf_highroad_solution/project_2358/ATA_Driver_Shortage_Report_2022_Executive_Summary_October22.pdf

³ CVTA supports benevolent competitions like the [Transition Trucking: Driving for Excellence](#) campaign that recognize veterans who join the trucking workforce.

Prepared Statement of National Association of State Workforce Agencies

October 16, 2023

The Honorable Derrick Van Orden
Chair
Economic Opportunity Subcommittee
Veterans Affairs Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
1513 Longworth House Office Building
Washington DC 20515

The Honorable Mike Levin
Ranking Member
Economic Opportunity Subcommittee
Veterans Affairs Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
2352 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington DC 20515

Dear Chair Van Orden and Ranking Member Levin,

On behalf of the National Association of State Workforce Agencies (NASWA), we write to express our concerns with HR 5913 – “To amend title 38, United States Code, to improve employment services for Veterans by consolidating various programs in the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes” that would move Veteran employment functions from the U.S. Department of Labor Veterans Employment and Training Services (USDOL VETS) to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

As a non-partisan organization whose members consist of the workforce agencies in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories, NASWA brings a unique and diverse perspective to the challenges facing our nation’s workforce. Our members are on the frontlines of service delivery for a range of workforce development programming, of which Veterans employment and training services is a central component. Our membership includes Jobs for Veterans State Grant coordinators and staff from the 50 states, Guam, Puerto Rico, the US Virgin Islands, and the District of Columbia.

We are concerned that HR 5913 would move the Jobs for Veterans State Grant out of USDOL VETS to the VA. NASWA believes it is critical to maintain and safeguard the vital role of Veterans’ programs in the workforce development system. The state workforce system is best suited to serve Veterans, transitioning service members, and military spouses because of its alignment and integration of employment and career services, and access to other state and federal workforce programs found in the American Job Centers (AJC). This includes serving Veterans facing significant barriers to workforce re-entry while avoiding duplication of federal job training, education, and human resource programs.

As written, HR 5913 significantly changes the current service delivery system by having employers connect Veterans with good career opportunities and providing intensive services to Veterans with Significant Barriers to Employment (SBEs). This work is currently performed by specially trained staff known as Local Veteran Employment Representatives (LVERs) and Disabled Veteran Outreach Program specialists (DVOPs). As written, the bill combines these functions into one position, the “Veteran Employment Specialist,” diluting the targeted approach and expertise the current model provides. A few states do currently have consolidated positions, but those are often in rural areas to provide program efficiency, and are the exception, not the rule, based upon the needs and discretion of the state.

The bill leaves many questions unanswered as to how Veterans would receive services, which state agency would deliver those services and where, and how funding allocations would be determined. There is also an expectation that the VA would enter into memorandums of agreement with each state. This requirement places an additional burden on our members, since no such requirement exists under the current model.

Today, Veterans, transitioning service members (TSMs) and their spouses have access to a wide variety of employment and training services through each state's one-stop center system, which are part of the AJC network. This integrated approach to service delivery affords Veterans access to employment and re-employment opportunities, resume assistance, training, case management, job search assistance workshops, unemployment insurance, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) training dollars, the Work Opportunity Tax Credit certification, public assistance, supportive services, and numerous partner services at one location – regardless of disability, educational level, economic status or employment barrier.

The current model allows for co-enrollment in multiple programs to provide access to services based on the Veteran's need. All AJC staff – not just the DVOPs and LVERs – are also responsible for ensuring Priority of Service is provided to Veterans for all USDOL funded employment and training programs such as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) administered by the USDOL Employment and Training Administration.

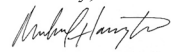
Under current federal law, separating service members and military spouses generally qualify as dislocated workers and can receive help entering or reentering the workforce under WIOA. In addition, WIOA expanded the definition of dislocated workers to include military spouses who lost employment as a direct result of a relocation to accommodate a permanent change in the service member's duty station. However, access to WIOA funding and assistance is only available to these affected individuals through the AJC.

If changes to this integrated service delivery model described above were made, they would be disruptive and costly to the public workforce system customers and staff, and to partner affiliations. Changes could require the creation of new and costly and duplicative new reporting or data management systems, development of new data sharing agreements, and a change in the collection of performance metrics.

A host of other concerns exist, as this bill would result in a fragmented service delivery model that would not benefit Veterans, employers or taxpayers, and create barriers for Veterans seeking assistance in their transition to civilian life.

We express our opposition to HR 5913 as currently written. NASWA stands ready to work with the Committee to make improvements to the bill to enhance and improve services for Veterans.

Sincerely,



Michael Harrington
NASWA Board Chair
Commissioner, Vermont Department of Labor



Scott B. Sanders
President & CEO
NASWA

Prepared Statement of Military-Veterans Advocacy, Inc.



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SECTIONS:
 Blue Water Navy
 Agent Orange
 Survivors of Guam
 Veterans of
 Southeast Asia
 Veterans of
 Panama Canal Zone
 Veterans of Okinawa
 At-Risk Veterans

October 20, 2023

Hon. Juan Ciscomani
 Member of House
 ATTN: Caroline Bender
 Room 1429, Longworth House Office Building
 Washington, DC 25015

Re: HR 5702, Expanding Access for Online Veteran Students Act

Dear Representative Ciscomani,

On behalf of Military-Veterans Advocacy® (MVA™), we would like to pledge our support for HR 5702.

To amend title 38, United States Code, to establish the monthly housing stipend under the post-9/11 Educational Assistance Program for individuals who pursue summer programs of education solely through distance learning. Thank you for introducing this bill.

You may use this letter as evidence of our support for this bill. Feel free to use it in Committee or in press releases.

MVA's point of contact is our Legislative Director, John B Wells, who can be reached at john.wells@mvadvocacy.org.

Sincerely,

John B Wells
 Commander, USN (Ret.)
 Chairman

cc: Hon. Mike Bost, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Chairman
 Hon. Mark Takano, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Ranking Member
 Hon. Derrick Van Orden, House Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity Chairman
 Hon. Mike Levin, House Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity Ranking Member