

Economic Opportunity Bill Hearing before HVAC

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STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE

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

WITH RESPECT TO

H.R. 357, H.R. 562, H.R. 631, H.R. 844, H.R. 1305, H.R. 1316, H.R. 1402, a draft bill entitled "Improving Job Opportunities for Veterans Act of 2013", and a draft bill entitled "To amend title 38, United States Code, to extend the authority to provide work-study allowance for certain activities by individuals

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receiving educational assistance by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs"

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Chairman Flores, Ranking Member Takano and members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the nearly 2 million members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and our Auxiliaries, I want to thank you for the opportunity to present the VFW's stance on legislation pending before this Subcommittee.

Though the economy continues to slowly recover, unemployment among young veterans who served after 9/11 continues to outpace unemployment among civilians. Over the last few years, the VFW has prioritized veteran-hiring initiatives and championed legislation before this committee in an effort to help our service members and veterans secure meaningful careers after military service.

I want to first thank the subcommittee for its hard work in the 112th Congress, championing legislation like the VOW to Hire Heroes Act, the Improving Transparency in Education for Veterans Act, and dozens of other initiatives that have helped make today's veterans more competitive during difficult economic times.

However, with the war in Iraq over, drawdown in Afghanistan imminent, proposed reductions in the active duty military and plans to rely heavily on the Guard and Reserve for future missions, we must continue to do more. The bills we are discussing today will help veterans of all eras remain competitive in the workforce; improve transitional resources for separating service members; foster rehabilitation among severely wounded veterans; and enhance services to homeless and at-risk veterans.

H.R. 357, GI Bill Tuition Fairness Act of 2013:

Over the last few years, the VFW, American Legion and Student Veterans of America have worked closely to improve educational resources for veterans, ensuring potential student-veterans are academically and financially prepared for the rigors of college life. A major roadblock that prevents student-veterans from receiving a quality, reasonably-priced education through the Post-9/11 GI Bill is the inability to qualify as in-state residents for tuition purposes while attending public colleges and universities. Specifically, recently-separated veterans who may be legal residents of a particular state, but who have been stationed on a military installation in another state, will not qualify as residents when they seek to attend a public college or university because they have not been physically present in the state long enough to qualify as a resident for tuition purposes. As of 2011, Student Veterans of America reports that only one out of every five veterans attending a public school is eligible to attend at the in-state rate.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill was intended to offer veterans a free, public education and a modest living stipend, allowing veterans to treat college as a full-time job, without worrying about financial stability. Current law only allows VA to reimburse veterans attending public schools for the cost of an in-state education, meaning veterans who cannot qualify for in-state tuition will only receive meager reimbursement for college. This clerical oversight forces veterans to find other ways to pay for college either through other federal aid programs, finding full time employment or amassing student loan debt even when they make a good faith effort to legally reside in a state and attend a public school.

An easy solution to this issue would be for public colleges and universities to allow Post-9/11 GI Bill-eligible veterans to attend at the in-state rate. Service members already have similar protections when they use military Tuition Assistance at public schools, with minimal impact on the ability of state colleges and universities to deliver a quality, reasonably-priced education.

Ten states already offer in-state tuition to veterans, eight states offer conditional waivers for veterans in certain circumstances, and 16 states have legislation pending. Of the states that have passed in-state tuition initiatives for veterans, both Republican and Democrat state leaders have all agreed that the financial benefits for the state far outweigh the illusory financial burdens that some in higher education believe would be detrimental to institutional budgets – particularly since graduates of public colleges and universities traditionally pursue careers close to their alma mater.

When Ohio passed its in-state tuition waiver in 2009, then- Gov. Ted Strickland said of in-state tuition, “It delivers real support to veterans while helping strengthen Ohio's strategic plan for higher education, which calls for attracting and keeping talent in the state. Who better to have as part of Ohio's colleges and universities, workforce and communities than the veterans who have served, led, and protected our country?”

When Virginia passed its law in 2011, Gov. Bob McDonnell said “These men and women have served our country; it is essential that we continue to work to better serve them. Veterans are the kind of citizens we want in the Commonwealth and that we want as part of our workforce.”

When Louisiana passed its law in 2012, Gov. Bobby Jindal said, “This new law encourages members of the U.S. military – who are the best trained professionals in the world – to pursue an education in our state, which will be an economic boost, but most importantly, it’s yet another means for us to thank these brave men and women for their service.”

The Post-9/11 GI Bill is a federal program designed to help our nation’s heroes acquire the skills necessary to build a successful career after military service. Our veterans served the nation; not a particular state. They should not be penalized for their honorable service when they cannot satisfy strict residency requirements for tuition purposes. The VFW regularly hears from student-veterans who confirm that financial uncertainty is the most significant roadblock to persistence and graduation. To combat this, it only makes sense to allow our student-veterans to attend college at a reasonable rate when seeking to use their earned Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, and we hope the committee moves quickly to pass this legislation.

H.R. 562, VRAP Extension Act of 2013:

The VFW was proud to support the establishment of the Veterans Retraining Assistance Program (VRAP) as part of the VOW to Hire Heroes Act on 2011. To date, more than 93,000 veterans between the ages of 35-60 have certified eligibility for the program. Unfortunately, fewer than 41,000 eligible veterans have enrolled in an eligible program to date. The original VRAP program is set to expire on March 31, 2014, meaning that veterans who did not enroll as of April 1 will not be able to use all 12 months of eligibility for the program. The

VFW supports extending this deadline to June 30, 2014 to ensure that eligible veterans can enroll in an academic program and use their full year of benefits.

However, the VFW echoes the concerns of this committee that enrollment remains too low. We fully support a report to Congress on the outcomes of VRAP, but we also ask the committee to consider two critical improvements to the program.

First, Congress should ease the restriction on institutional eligibility for VRAP. The VFW understands that VRAP will only pay for programs no longer than two years in duration. As a result, four-year institutions are ineligible to participate. On the surface, this makes sense. Unfortunately, quality four-year institutions that offer certificate and two-year programs are locked out of VRAP, and veterans are told to enroll at community colleges or online schools.

However, not all communities offer community colleges. For example, in Erie, Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania State University Erie Campus serves as a de facto community college, even though the school also offers four-year programs. Veterans who wish to use their VRAP benefits will not find an eligible community college nearby. They simply do not exist in Erie.

Second, Congress must make it easier for VRAP benefits to cover remediation training. Recently, the VFW heard from the Student Veterans Organization at the Community College of Rhode Island, which boasts significant enrollment from VRAP-eligible veterans. By the very nature of the program, many eligible veterans require significant remediation in areas like math, composition and computer literacy. Unfortunately, CCRI's student-veterans report that these basic remedial skills cannot be paid for through VRAP since they are not part of the core curriculum for VRAP-approved programs. The VFW believes this sets up eligible veterans for failure. Veterans must be able to use VRAP for basic remediation. Otherwise, we cannot reasonably expect veterans to have the skills necessary to complete their approved programs in a timely manner.

H.R. 631, Servicemembers' Choice in Transition Act of 2013:

The VFW fully supports the redesign of the military's transition assistance programs (TAP), and we thank VA, Department of Labor, the Small Business Administration, and Department of Defense for allowing VFW to audit and evaluate pilot curricula for redesigned TAP and the new Transition GPS model.

While we acknowledge that TAP has significantly improved through this latest redesign, we have concerns that the program will still fail to adequately prepare service members for civilian life, since participation in individualized tracked curricula will not be mandatory.

Rather than mandating participation in one of three new tracks focusing on education, vocational/technical careers or entrepreneurship, DoD has instead decided that service members will need to meet "career readiness standards" in the track of their choice. To the VFW, this is not what we envisioned when we suggested that DoD develop curricula from which a transitioning service member could choose prior to separation.

Instead, the VFW envisioned a model similar to Marine Corps TAP, through which a service member would attend service-specific training, the VA benefits briefings, then choose from one of four tracks: Employment, education, entrepreneurship, and vocational/technical. Chairman Flores, your bill clarifies that the intent of the TAP redesign was to offer this kind of transitional training, and we are proud to support it.

The VFW supports DoD's efforts to build a life cycle model for military professional development, but we are concerned that the new model will still fail to adequately prepare service members for civilian life. We prefer the model set forth in H.R. 631, which allows service members to actively choose their unique transition plan, but also acknowledges the finite time frame services can dedicate to preparing separating service members for civilian life.

H.R. 844, VetSuccess Enhancement Act:

The VFW has a long-standing resolution calling on VA to lift the delimiting date for

participation in the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR&E) program, and we are proud to support H.R. 844, which extends the delimiting date by five years.

The VFW has long held that if disabled veterans need additional skills to be employable, then VA has a duty to offer these resources regardless of how long a veteran has been separated from the military. Over time, service-connected disabilities can limit veterans in their career choices. Veterans limited by their disabilities may need VR&E services later in life to remain competitive in an ever-changing workforce, and the VFW believes it is our obligation to offer those resources without arbitrary time restrictions.

VA already has some regulatory flexibility in how it can administer VR&E benefits, but the VFW prefers to see the delimiting date lifted in code.

H.R. 1305, To amend title 38, United States Code, to provide clarification regarding eligibility for services under the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program:

The Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP) offers tremendous transitional resources to homeless veterans seeking to reenter the workforce. Unfortunately, due to the rigid definition of “homeless veteran,” many formerly homeless, formerly incarcerated, or transitioning veterans who could benefit the most from the program are ineligible. By expanding the definition to include these categories of at-risk veterans, HVRP will offer more veterans the opportunity to successfully reenter the workforce.

H.R. 1316, To amend title 38, United States Code, to specify the responsibilities of the Directors and Assistant Directors of Veterans’ Employment and Training:

The VFW is proud to support H.R. 1316, which will finally codify the specific responsibilities of Directors of Veterans Employment and Training (DVETS) and Assistant Directors of Veterans Employment and Training (ADVETS) in state workforce development agencies. The VFW understands that many DVETS and ADVETS already fulfill these responsibilities,

but we echo Department of Labor Veterans Employment and Training Services that federally-funded directors responsible for managing veterans' employment resources on the state level must have consistency in mission. The VFW is also concerned that DVETS and ADVETS must be protected should the SKILLS Act (H.R. 803) gain momentum in Congress, transforming how state workforce development programs are funded and structured. Our goal is to ensure that veteran-specific resources continue to be available in every state and that services are rendered consistently. In order to do this, the House Veterans Affairs Committee must be able to provide direct funding and continue to have direct oversight of DVETS and ADVETS.

H.R. 1402, To amend title 38, United States Code, to extend the authorization of appropriations for the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to pay a monthly assistance allowance to disabled veterans training or competing for the Paralympic Team and the authorization of appropriations for the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide assistance to United States Paralympics, Inc.:

The VFW believes that rehabilitation through sports fosters healthy living, physical fitness, and a competitive spirit for our disabled veterans, many of whom have suffered catastrophic injuries in the line of duty. VFW Posts and Departments around the country consistently support rehabilitative sports in their communities, which is why we are proud to support extending VA's collaboration with United States Paralympics, Inc. through 2018.

By supporting responsible rehabilitative sports initiatives like those provided by the U.S. Paralympic Team, the VFW believes that combat-wounded veterans will not simply overcome their injuries, but also discover new personal strengths and abilities.

Draft bill, Improving Job Opportunities for Veterans Act of 2013:

The VFW believes that the intent of the GI Bill is to allow veterans to acquire the necessary skills to compete in the civilian job market. For many veterans, the simplest path to acquiring these skills is through higher education. However, we must stress that college is not for everybody, which is why GI Bill-eligible veterans can also acquire highly-marketable job skills through VA-approved apprenticeship and on-the-job training programs (OJT).

The National Association of State Approving Agencies (NASAA) consistently touts the merits of approved OJT programs, but admittedly has trouble informing eligible veterans that the programs exist.

Through this draft legislation, VA will be able to readily publicize the availability of OJT and also make the program more attractive to potential employers by offering greater flexibility in compensation for trainees. To take this one step further, the VFW would suggest restoring outreach funding to State Approving Agencies, which play a critical role in informing veterans of OJT opportunities.

The VFW would proudly support this initiative to increase the visibility and viability of VA-approved OJT programs.

Draft bill, To amend title 38, United States Code, to extend the authority to provide work-study allowance for certain activities by individuals receiving educational assistance by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs:

This draft bill is a simple extension of VA's authority to offer work-study allowances for student-veterans. The VFW has long supported the VA work-study program and we would proudly support this initiative to extend the program to 2018.

Chairman Flores, Ranking Member Takano, and members of the Subcommittee, this concludes my testimony and I would be happy to answer any questions you 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, VFW has not received any federal grants in Fiscal Year 2013, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.