



**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”**

APRIL 14, 2021

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, and Members of the Subcommittee: Thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit testimony on the pending legislation being considered. With a mission focused on empowering student veterans, SVA is committed to providing an educational experience that goes beyond the classroom.

Through a dedicated network of more than 1,500 on-campus chapters in all 50 states and four countries overseas representing more than 750,000 student veterans, 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 can effectively connect, expand their skills, and ultimately achieve their greatest potential.

As shared in our recent testimony outlining our annual policy priorities before the Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees, SVA is committed to viewing and advocating for the GI Bill as the front door to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).¹ Many of the bills being considered today directly impact student veterans, their families, and survivors, and address several of our recommended priorities. We appreciate your swift attention to these issues and the opportunity to share our views on many of these bills that improve VA's front door, the GI Bill.

Draft legislation, to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide educational assistance under the Post-9/11 Educational Assistance Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs to students who are rounding out during their final semester, term, or academic period.

SVA supports this draft legislation, which would establish a formal Round-Out Rule at VA and ensure beneficiaries are not deprived of their full education benefit in their final term.

VA has announced it will phase out a practice known as the Round-Out Rule on or after August 1, 2021.² The Round-Out Rule allows GI Bill students who are in their final term to "round out" their course schedule with non-required courses to achieve full-time status. This enables these students to finish their final term while receiving full-time benefits.³

To achieve full-time status and receive their maximum VA education benefit, students must only take courses required for the completion of their program. However, it can be incredibly difficult for students to perfectly plan their academic schedules to ensure enough required courses will be available in their final term. If there are not enough required courses available to reach full-time status, students receive significantly reduced benefits, including a lower Monthly Housing Allowance (MHA).

The Round-Out Rule is not found in statute or regulation. Rather, it is VA guidance to School Certifying Officials that the agency previously found appropriate to cure a basic unfairness in how benefit requirements can impact some students in their final term. Despite years of administering the benefit this way, and without any notable objections, VA appears to believe they no longer have the authority to afford students the compassion of this limited reprieve.

SVA and others, including the National Association of Veterans' Program Administrators (NAVPA), believe the

¹ STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA, TESTIMONY BEFORE THE H. AND S. COMMS. ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS ON LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES OF 2021 117th Cong., 6-7 (March 3, 2021), available at <https://www.veterans.senate.gov/download/sva-testimony>.

² *School Certifying Official Handbook (On-line) – Rounding Out*, U.S DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (Dec. 3, 2020), https://www.knowva.ebenefits.va.gov/system/templates/selfservice/va_ssnew/help/customer/locale/enUS/portal/55440000001018/content/55440000149088/School-Certifying-Official-Handbook-On-line#Rounding%20Out.

³ *Id.*

elimination of this policy will increase out-of-pocket costs for certain student veterans in their final term, force them to take out unnecessary loans, and potentially cause some to drop out of school altogether.⁴

This draft legislation would ensure student veterans have access to a fair housing allowance throughout their final term by cementing the Round-Out Rule in law. While SVA supports this effort, we feel it is important to note that Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) benefits are not covered by the current draft legislation. Perhaps VA believes they have the authority to either continue the Round-Out Rule or that is unnecessary entirely for VR&E benefits without legislation. That would be perplexing given the agency has announced its specific intent, in the VR&E School Certifying Official Handbook, to eliminate the practice for VR&E.⁵

We encourage the members of this subcommittee to take swift action on this draft legislation to ensure adequate protections are in place before VA phases out its informal Round-Out Rule in August.

Draft legislation, to provide for extensions of the time limitations for use of entitlement under Department of Veterans Affairs educational assistance programs by reason of school closures due to emergency and other situations.

SVA supports this draft legislation, which stops the delimiting date from running on VA education benefits when students are impacted by emergencies.

Last year, SVA led the push to establish emergency protections for student veterans, service members, their families, and survivors who were at risk of being negatively impacted by the abrupt education changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thanks to Congress, especially those on this subcommittee, a host of protections were rapidly passed into law to protect millions of students from nightmare scenarios that would have negatively impacted their education benefits.⁶

For years, student veterans have encountered challenges accessing benefits during times of unexpected hardship, often due to natural disasters.⁷ The pandemic exposed the true scale of these challenges and the numerous gaps in VA authority which prevent the agency from protecting students and their benefits in emergency situations. Despite its best intentions, VA simply lacks the legal authority to administer benefits with the flexibility necessary to protect students in these circumstances.

Among the several emergency protections passed last year was a policy that stopped delimiting dates for veterans' education benefits from running during the pandemic.⁸ To demonstrate the issue, consider a student who is subject to a delimiting date for their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits. These students must use the benefit within 15 years of last leaving active duty. During the pandemic, many of these students were unexpectedly prevented from pursuing higher education, despite the clock continuing to run on their benefit eligibility. The protection passed last year paused delimiting periods while students were prevented from pursuing their studies, which protected valuable time for veterans to use their benefits.

⁴ NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF VETERANS PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS, VETERANS' EDUCATION PROGRAMS ISSUES AND LEGISLATION TALKING POINTS 2020, ADMINISTRATORS (2020) 3, available at <https://www.navpa.org/wpcontent/uploads/2020/03/NAVPA-Leg-Agenda-Feb-2020-Talking-points.pdf>.

⁵ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS, VR&E SCHOOL CERTIFYING OFFICIAL HANDBOOK, AFFAIRS 8 (2020), available at https://www.benefits.va.gov/GIBILL/docs/job_aids/VRE_SCO_Handbook.pdf.

⁶ See Leo Shane III, *Lawmakers pass second emergency package to protect student veterans from coronavirus losses*, MILITARY TIMES (April 21, 2020), <https://www.militarytimes.com/education-transition/2020/04/21/lawmakers-pass-second-emergency-package-to-protect-student-veterans-from-coronavirus-losses/>.

⁷ See *generally Natural Disaster Map*, STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA, <https://studentveterans.org/government-affairs/natural-disaster-map/> (last visited Apr. 8, 2021).

⁸ Pub. L. No. 116-140 § 6.

This draft legislation is an important, forward-thinking policy that would make this protection permanent and broadly available for use in future emergencies. The COVID-19 pandemic was not the first emergency to impact student veterans, and it certainly will not be the last. Veterans' opportunities to use their earned education benefits must be protected during periods of extreme hardship, and this draft bill would help ensure VA has the authority to do that.

SVA supports this draft legislation as an important *first step* toward permanently codifying the many protections passed in response to the pandemic and fully protecting student veterans and their benefits in future emergencies.

Draft legislation, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to implement a modern information technology service to process claims for educational assistance under chapters 30, 33, 35, and 36 of title 38, United States Code.

SVA supports this draft legislation, which would set important objectives and transparency requirements for VA's existing Digital GI Bill modernization project.

Our organization has been a consistent, vocal advocate for a full-scale modernization of the GI Bill.⁹ The measure has also been championed by many of the leading veteran-serving organizations, including those responsible for issuing the Independent Budget.¹⁰ In the 21st Century, veterans deserve nothing less than the full implementation of a "Digital GI Bill." To meet the needs of our veterans, VA Education Service platforms must become a system that can adapt and change with the evolving landscape of higher education.

This modernization effort is already underway thanks to the steps Congress took last year to provide VA with the funds needed to start this process. We appreciate VA's prompt efforts to begin implementing these changes, including by recently awarding a contract for this work. Still, the project is very much in its infancy.

We believe this draft legislation establishes critical benchmarks and requirements for transparency that will ensure VA addresses specific IT infrastructure issues and provides appropriate updates on its progress. We are hopeful this legislation will help VA avoid the pitfalls that plagued previous implementation efforts, like that of the Forever GI Bill. SVA looks forward to working with the members of this subcommittee and officials at VA to ensure this modernization effort is successful. The educational experiences of current and future generations of student veterans depend on it.

Draft legislation to require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to make available to veterans certain additional information about postsecondary educational institutions.

SVA supports this draft legislation, which would add new information to the GI Bill Comparison Tool to enable students to find institutions that best meet their individual needs more easily.

⁹ See generally STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA, TESTIMONY BEFORE THE SUBCOMM. ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY AND TECHNOLOGY MODERNIZATION OF THE H. COMM. ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS ON MOVING BEYOND PATCHWORK SYSTEMS: THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION SERVICES IT, 116th Cong. (Sept. 16, 2020), available at https://studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/HVAC-EO_-IT_Testimony_Sept16_2020.pdf; STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA, TESTIMONY BEFORE THE H. AND S. COMMS. ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS ON LEGISLATION PRIORITIES OF 2020, 116th Cong. 6 (March 3, 2020), available at <https://www.veterans.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/03.03.2020%20-%20SVA%20Testimony.pdf>; STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA, TESTIMONY BEFORE THE H. AND S. COMMS. ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS ON LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES OF 2019, 116th Cong. 7 (March 7, 2019), available at <https://www.veterans.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/5%20-%20SVA%20Testimony%2003.07.19.pdf>.

¹⁰ DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS, PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA & THE VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES, THE INDEPENDENT BUDGET VETERANS AGENDA FOR THE 117TH CONGRESS 40-41 (2020), available at <http://www.independentbudget.org/117-congress/pdf/Congress117-IB-Critical-Issues.pdf>.

We have long called for improving the quantity and quality of information available to students through the GI Bill Comparison Tool, to include incorporating more data from existing resources at the Department of Education (ED).¹¹ This draft legislation is a step in that direction and would require VA to indicate whether schools are a minority-serving institution, religiously affiliated, or gender specific. Importantly, the draft legislation leverages existing information about institutions already available at ED and other federal agencies to make this a relatively straightforward update for VA.

SVA welcomes this and other efforts to enhance the GI Bill Comparison and Feedback tools. We encourage members of this subcommittee to continue seeking ways to further improve these critical resources.

Draft legislation, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out a Native VetSuccess at Tribal Colleges and Universities Pilot Program.

SVA supports this draft legislation, which would expand the popular VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) programs by providing additional resources for Native American veterans.

We routinely hear positive feedback about VSOC throughout the year from our Chapters. It is a frequently utilized program on campuses nationwide. Unfortunately, we also hear that demand for the program vastly outstrips current resources. We also know Native Americans serve our country at a higher rate per capita than any other ethnic group, but that historically when they separate from service they have “have lower incomes, lower educational attainment and higher unemployment than veterans of other races.”¹²

This draft legislation would create a pilot program that expands VSOC by assigning counselors to several tribal colleges and universities. Simply put, this draft bill would help ensure more Native American veterans have what they need to succeed in higher education and the workforce.

We encourage the members of this subcommittee, and Congress more broadly, to support this draft legislation and to provide VA with the necessary resources to implement this pilot project.

Draft legislation, to establish in the Department the Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration.

SVA supports this draft legislation, which would establish an Under Secretary of Economic Opportunity at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

The proposal would move economic opportunity-focused programs into a distinct lane within VA known as the Economic Opportunity and Transition 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 (VBA) and functionally in competition against disability compensation policy for internal resources.

VA proudly and rightly pronounces, “Economic competitiveness isn’t just about employment; it encompasses overall employment, wealth, independent living, housing, career mobility and educational attainment. VA is proud to work alongside employment experts at the Department of Labor (DOL) and policy leaders in Department of

¹¹ STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA, TESTIMONY BEFORE THE H. AND S. COMMS. ON VETERANS’ AFFAIRS ON LEGISLATION PRIORITIES OF 2021, 117th Cong. 11-12 (March 3, 2021), *available at* <https://www.veterans.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/SVA%20Testimony%2003.03.21.pdf>; STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA, TESTIMONY BEFORE THE H. AND S. COMMS. ON VETERANS’ AFFAIRS ON LEGISLATION PRIORITIES OF 2020, 116th Cong. 6-7 (March 3, 2020), *available at* <https://www.veterans.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/03.03.2020%20-%20SVA%20Testimony.pdf>; STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA, TESTIMONY BEFORE THE H. AND S. COMMS. ON VETERANS’ AFFAIRS ON LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES OF 2019, 116th Cong. 8 (March 7, 2019), *available at* <https://www.veterans.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/5%20-%20SVA%20Testimony%2003.07.19.pdf>.

¹² U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS, AMERICAN INDIAN AND ALASKA NATIVE SERVICEMEMBERS AND VETERANS 2 (Sept. 2012), *a* https://www.va.gov/tribalgovernment/docs/aian_report_final_v2_7.pdf.

Defense (DoD) to ensure we are in alignment with relevant trends and services they offer to transitioning service members and veterans.”¹³ With economic opportunity as a stated priority of VA, we strongly support the establishment of an Under Secretary of Economic Opportunity at VA, who would report directly to the Secretary.

Economic opportunity programs are buried within the bureaucracy of VA and lack a true champion in leadership at the level these programs deserve. The consequences of these programs being relegated to second-tier status within VBA has been on full display in recent years, most notably with VA’s initial failure to successfully implement the congressional mandates of the Forever GI Bill in a timely manner.¹⁴

Over the past century, VA evolved to focus on compensating veterans for loss, which worked for previous generations of veterans, but fails to address the future needs of veterans and those of our Nation. The reality of the 21st century and beyond demands we prioritize the goal of empowering veterans to excel post-service. Critically, this proposal advances the interests of our Nation by enhancing economic competitiveness. Further, this focus on veteran contributions to business and industry, governments, non-profit organizations, and communities, as well as preparation through the best education programs in our country, will provide imperative returns on taxpayer dollars.

VA is committed to a “Whole Health” approach for serving veterans. The agency describes the concept as focusing on “health and well-being.”¹⁵ Economic opportunity and well-being are, in many ways, inextricably linked. As the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states quite plainly, “[p]aid employment is critical to the well-being of individuals by conferring direct access to resources, as well as fostering satisfaction, meaning and purpose for some.”¹⁶ It is time that the structure of VA reflect how important economic opportunity is to the “whole health” of our veterans.

To truly achieve “whole health” outcomes for our veterans, it is essential we afford VA the opportunity to enrich the lives of veterans through the appropriate prioritization of VA’s economic opportunity programs. Consistent with SVA’s belief that the GI Bill is the front door to VA, we also expect this realignment will play an essential role as a gateway to VA’s other services. Improved interactions between VA and veterans related to economic opportunity programs—some of the first and most popular programs veterans interact with VA on—will only boost veterans’ faith in VA’s ability to execute other aspects of its mission.

For years, SVA has consistently articulated our commitment to elevating economic opportunity programs at VA and identified the need to address a lack of resource-focus on these programs within the greater scope of VA’s overall budget.¹⁷ The proposal for a fourth administration would de-layer and simplify some of the bureaucracy of VA, particularly that which exists within VBA. With proper safeguards in place, it would curb any expansion of government while providing economic opportunity and transition programs an accountable champion, resulting in

¹³ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS, ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY FOR VETERANS – UNDERSTANDING ECONOMIC COMPETITIVENESS IN RELATION TO THEIR NON-VETERAN COUNTERPARTS 1 (June 4, 2019), available at https://www.ea.oit.va.gov/EAOIT/OpenData/docs/Economic-Opportunities-for-Veterans-data_va_gov.pdf.

¹⁴ Nikki Wentling, *Delays in Forever GI Bill implementation could affect veteran’s checks*, STARS AND STRIPES (Sept. 5, 2018), <https://www.stripes.com/news/delays-in-forever-gi-bill-implementation-could-affect-veterans-checks-1.546073>.

¹⁵ *Whole Health*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (last updated March 29, 2021), <https://www.va.gov/wholehealth/>.

¹⁶ *Health-Related Quality of Life (HRQOL) - Well-being Concepts*, U.S. CENTERS FOR DISEASE PREVENTION AND CONTROL (last reviewed Oct. 31, 2018), <https://www.cdc.gov/hrqol/wellbeing.htm> (citations omitted).

¹⁷ See Hubbard, William. Testimony for Legislative Hearing on the Topic of “Legislative Hearing on H.R. 1206, H.R. 3023, H.R. 3940, H.R. 4451, H.R. 4830, H.R. 4835, H.R. 5044, and a draft bill entitled, ‘VA Home Loan Improvement Act of 2018’.” March 20, 2018, House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR10/20180320/108011/HHRG-115-VR10-Wstate-HubbardW-20180320.pdf>; Augustine, Lauren. Testimony for Legislative Hearing on the Topic of “U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Fiscal Year 2019 Budget: Veterans Benefits Administration and the Board of Veterans’ Appeals.” March 15, 2018, House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs Subcommittees on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, Economic Opportunity, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR09/20180315/106968/HHRG-115-VR09-Wstate-AugustineL-20180315.pdf>; Vangellow, Cassandra. Testimony for Oversight Hearing on the Topic of “A Review of VA’s Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program.” May 17, 2018, House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, <https://veterans.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=216>; add 2019 and 2020.

abundant improvements to support veterans, such as:

Increases Accountability. This proposal would provide for greater accountability of and access to VA services that empower veterans. It further prevents these issues from being reduced in priority with shifting VBA leadership. Recent VA leadership has shown a commitment to economic opportunity programs, but that support fluctuates based on leadership and individual priorities. The creation of an Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration would institutionalize the importance of these programs with dedicated leadership and accountability.

Elevates Economic Opportunity Issues. Directly relevant to Executive Order 13822, “Supporting Our Veterans during Their Transition from Uniformed Services to Civilian Life”, this proposal supports the importance of transition, education, employment, and well-being.¹⁸ Further, it sends a strong message to veterans and the American public that economic opportunity issues truly matter and are important enough to have the leadership of an Under Secretary. Providing a dedicated voice at VA on issues like home ownership, education, training, and employment is a critically important measure that will help VA reach and better serve far more veterans. Further, it provides a champion to engage with the Department of Education in advancing higher education interests for veterans.

Reduces Bureaucracy. Bureaucracy at VA has historically led to serious national challenges and keeping economic opportunity issues buried at the bottom of VBA is not the answer. The consequences of the current bureaucratic structure were painfully apparent during the initially botched implementation of certain provisions of the Forever GI Bill. VA’s Office of Inspector General (OIG) detailed how the lack of leadership within VBA resulted in technical failures and a dearth of accountability during the implementation process.¹⁹ This proposal flattens the bureaucracy of VA in favor of the veteran instead of creating additional layers in the current structure.

Establishes Direct Counterpart. The Department of Labor and DoD lack a direct and dedicated counterpart within VA’s Under Secretary leadership for the programs that overlap the agencies—any significant initiative must achieve multiple layers of approval before reaching the customers: our country’s veterans. This is increasingly important as these agencies continue to prioritize initiatives, such as DOL’s Veterans’ and Employment Training Service (VETS), which seek to address shared priorities. This proposal provides DoD and DOL with a political appointee who can move important programs into the modern age, while supporting intersection missions more broadly for positive, holistic interagency solutions.

Supports “Whole Health.” A tragically elastic narrative exists around veterans as either “broken or damaged.” In reality, veterans are fundamentally the same as all other Americans: hard-working, community-oriented neighbors who want what’s best for their families, and who thrive in higher education and career when they have opportunity to access economic opportunity programs. Creation of an Under Secretary of Economic Opportunity will empower veterans to be successful as they transition through improved education programs and better employment opportunities. One of the major challenges facing veterans today is “transition stress,” an issue an Under Secretary of Economic Opportunity would be keen to address via a robust portfolio of programs and services veterans can rely on during transition to advance their, and our country’s, economic interests.²⁰ With better service and stronger outcomes, more veterans will be apt to actually “Choose VA.”

¹⁸ See generally Exec. Order No. 13822, 83 C.F.R. 1513 (2018).

¹⁹ See generally U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL, FOREVER GI BILL: EARLY IMPLEMENTATION CHANGES (March 20, 2019), <https://www.va.gov/oig/pubs/VAOIG-19-06452-97.pdf>.

²⁰ See James Clark, *For Most Vets, PTSD Isn’t the Problem, ‘Transition Stress’ Is. Here’s What that Means*, TASK AND PURPOSE (January 25, 2018), <http://taskandpurpose.com/what-is-transition-stress>.

Bold initiatives are required to ensure our country delivers the best outcomes possible for veterans instead of falling back on the status quo of the current bureaucracy. Some have cited concerns regarding increased costs and redundancy in roles. Notably, this proposal achieves the exact opposite outcome, as it will streamline these programs given a dedicated leader. Others have argued for continuing to give current leaders at VA the chance to address and elevate these issues through their own work. For decades, VA has had the opportunity to elevate economic opportunity issues. The approach of “wait and see” is not an approach at all. It is, instead, a waiting game that serves to avoid necessary structural reform, while continuing to miss the mark on providing veterans the level of service they deserve for the benefits they earned. Waiting for the bureaucracy to change itself is ultimately misguided and short-sighted. VBA’s dependence on the personality-driven success of its ever-changing leadership is not a viable solution to the structural challenges that deprive VA’s economic opportunity programs of adequate leadership, accountability, and attention.

Veterans’ organizations have come out in force to support a Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration when it was introduced in the previous congress, including: The Disabled American Veterans (DAV), The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA), and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA).²¹ The Independent Budget, an authoritative annual presentation of recommended funding levels produced by American Veterans (AMVETS), DAV, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA), and VFW called for the change as early as 2012.²²

The American Enterprise Institute (AEI) published a compelling argument for restructuring VA in a piece titled, “Economic Opportunity, Transition Assistance, and the 21st-Century Veteran: The Case for a Fourth VA Administration.”²³ AEI’s research concluded legislative language related to veterans creates a powerful and sustained narrative related to this population; notably, language consistent with a “deficit model,” words such as ‘broken’, ‘wounded’, ‘helpless’, etc., damage overall perceptions of this population wreaking further havoc on a wider audience of veterans.²⁴ Conversely, language consistent with an “asset model,” such as ‘civic asset,’ ‘successful,’ ‘leaders,’ etc., has the effect of improving the likelihood of achieving positive transition and long-range experiences. This proposal strongly reinforces a positive narrative of veterans, as it proposes elevating issue areas the public widely views as empowering such as education, employment, home ownership, and others.

We encourage this subcommittee to invest significant data authorities in this new administration so it can effectively track, and one day project, the true impact empowered veterans have on the country’s economic health. For example, we know the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, known as the original GI Bill, had an economic output of at least \$5 for every \$1 dollar invested in that program.²⁵ Insights like these will be vital to establishing the long-term value of these programs. Further, we recommend the new administration produce a consolidated annual report reviewing program efficacy to track key metrics tied to outcomes in addition to actual outputs.

VA publicly declares their “mission to help veterans maximize their economic competitiveness and thus, increase the number of economic opportunities for veterans and their families.”²⁶ This proposal ensures economic opportunity programs have the necessary focus, leadership, and accountability that will finally allow VA to execute

²¹ United States. Cong. H. Committee on Veterans Affairs. Legislative Hearing on H.R. 356; H.R. 832; H.R. 1994; H.R. 2133; H.R. 2275; H.R. 2344; H.R. 2360; H.R. 2361; and a draft bill. Hearings, June 2, 2007. 114th Cong. 1st sess.

²² AMVETS, DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS, PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA, & VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES, THE INDEPENDENT BUDGET FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS BUDGET 227-231 (2012), *available at* http://www.independentbudget.org/2012/IB_FY2012.pdf

²³ Burgess, Rebecca. American Enterprise Institute (2018). “Economic Opportunity, Transition Assistance, and the 21st-Century Veteran: The Case for a Fourth VA Administration,” <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Economic-Opportunity-Transition-Assistance-and-the-21st-Century-Veteran.pdf?x91208>.

²⁴ See *generally id.* at 2-3.

²⁵ STAFF OF SUBCOMM. ON EDUCATION AND HEALTH OF THE JOINT ECONOMIC COMM., 100TH CONG., A COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS OF GOVERNMENT INVESTMENT IN POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION UNDER THE WORLD WAR II GI BILL 1, 10-11 (Dec. 14, 1988).

²⁶ *Understanding Economic Competitiveness in Relation to Their Non-Veteran Counterparts*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS 1 (June 4, 2019), https://www.ea.oit.va.gov/EAOIT/OpenData/docs/Economic-Opportunities-for-Veterans-data_va_gov.pdf.

that mission consistent with its rhetoric. Future generations of veterans are counting on the success of this proposal, and we are eager to work with this Congress and the White House to make it a reality.

H.R. 147, Bringing Registered Apprenticeships to Veterans Education Act

SVA agrees with the underlying premise of this bill; more can be done to inform veterans about registered apprenticeship opportunities, but we are not convinced this bill is necessary to accomplish that goal. We also have reservations about the changes it would make to GI Bill stipend language.

Apprenticeships are important post-transition pathways for veterans to secure rewarding employment. Connecting veterans with information about these opportunities is more important than ever as many try to regain a foothold in an economy still recovering from the impacts of the pandemic. Apprenticeship opportunities are currently part of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) curriculum,²⁷ and DOL maintains a website dedicated to registered apprenticeship programs, including an “Apprenticeship Job Finder” tool.²⁸

This bill seeks to ensure transitioning service members have the chance to learn about registered apprenticeships. This seems unnecessary since service members already receive information about these opportunities through TAP’s Career and Credential Exploration materials which are used as part of the Vocational Training Track.²⁹ This information is provided as part of this track’s Participant Guide and presentation.³⁰

This legislation would also require that VA establish a dedicated website for registered apprenticeships, but DOL already maintains a website on registered apprenticeships that allows users to search for these opportunities.³¹ SVA believes it would be more prudent to simply improve DOL’s existing apprenticeship tool through the addition of the veteran-specific information highlighted in this bill. This would increase the utility of DOL’s current apprenticeship website as a resource for transitioning service members and veterans while preventing redundancy. VA could even link to the improved tool from its current webpage for on-the-job training and apprenticeship benefits.

SVA is also concerned about language in this bill that would alter the description of GI Bill Monthly Housing Allowances. Specifically, the bill would eliminate the word “housing” from current stipend language. This is unnecessary.

The monthly housing stipend is intended to help student veterans cover basic living expenses while they pursue education or training. Many veterans using the benefit for on-the-job training live off-campus, but nothing about current language prevents the stipend from being used to cover off-campus housing costs or other living expenses like food and transportation. This is precisely how many student veterans already use the stipend, so changing the wording is unnecessary.

We support the goal of this draft legislation, but we ask members of this subcommittee to instead seek ways to improve and better leverage existing resources at DOL to provide veterans with better access to apprenticeship opportunities.

²⁷ *Transition Assistance Program*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/programs/tap> (last visited April 8, 2021).

²⁸ APPRENTICESHIP.GOV, <https://www.apprenticeship.gov/apprenticeship-job-finder> (last visited April 8, 2021); *Start Your Career and Build Your Skillset Through Apprenticeship*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR, <https://www.apprenticeship.gov/apprenticeship-job-finder> (last visited April 8, 2021).

²⁹ *Transition Assistance Program*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/programs/tap> (last visited April 8, 2021).

³⁰ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR, DOL CAREER AND CREDENTIAL EXPLORATION (C2E) PARTICIPANT GUIDE 56-58 (Jan. 2021), *available at* <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/VETS/files/TAP-C2E-Participant-Guide.pdf>; U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR, THE DOL CAREER AND CREDENTIAL EXPLORATION (C2E) WORKSHOP 55-58 (Jan. 2021), *available at* <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/VETS/files/TAP-C2E-Presentation.pdf>.

³¹ *Start Your Career and Build Your Skillset Through Apprenticeship*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR, <https://www.apprenticeship.gov/apprenticeship-job-finder> (last visited April 8, 2021).

Additional Legislation

In addition to the legislation above, SVA supports the draft legislation directing the Assistant Secretary of Labor for Veterans' Employment and Training to carry out a pilot program on short-term fellowship programs for veterans. Fellowships can be an effective tool to connect veterans with post-service employment opportunities. We would ask that members of the subcommittee reevaluate the language that affords veterans an opportunity for long-term employment. SVA fully supports opportunities for long-term employment following a veteran's successful completion of the fellowship, but we are concerned the draft legislation's current language may mandate long-term employment offers regardless of whether the veteran successfully completes the fellowship.

We also support H.R. 2195, which would protect veterans from mandatory arbitration agreements in employment matters covered under the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA). Veterans should not be forced to bargain away their right to bring a claim in court when asserting protections under USERRA.

SVA supports the draft legislation to eliminate time periods for benefit eligibility under Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance Program. This is a long overdue change that finally aligns this benefit with the Post-9/11 GI Bill, which Congress eliminated benefit-expiration dates for in 2017.

Additionally, SVA supports the draft legislation that would expand in-state tuition benefits to students using the Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance Program. Again, this change would bring this benefit into parity with the Post-9/11 GI Bill, whose beneficiaries have enjoyed in-state tuition benefits, in some form, for many years.

Finally, SVA supports the draft legislation that would increase annual funding for the Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) program. VET TEC is an incredibly popular program, which is demonstrated every year by the rapid depletion of funding that prevents many veterans from participating.³² We appreciate the attention Congress has afforded this program, including the additional funds provided last Congress. SVA believes demand for the program will remain strong, and perhaps even increase as veterans who suffered employment setbacks due to the pandemic attempt to upskill and reskill to secure jobs in a recovering economy. As with all education benefits, we encourage Congress to monitor and prioritize quality outcomes and to continually explore ways to defend beneficiaries from bad-actor institutions and training providers.

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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. This is the legacy we know today's student veterans carry.

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.

³² See Jim Absher, *VA's High-Tech Training Program Runs Out of Money After One Month*, MILITARY.COM (Nov. 6, 2020), <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2020/11/06/vas-high-tech-training-program-runs-out-of-money-after-one-month.html>.