

Economic Opportunity

The VFW's Concerns:

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is comprised of three administrations. The Veterans Benefits Administration is the largest of the three, overseeing the delivery of compensation and pension benefits, the GI Bill, VR&E, TAP, and home and business loans. The VFW believes economic opportunity is a lifelong need with the vast majority of veterans seeking meaningful employment, education, or job training. A fourth administration must be established in VA to properly address veterans' economic opportunity benefits utilization and improvement, with a dedicated Under Secretary with the authority to refocus resources, independently promote these programs, and create a central point of contact for Veterans Service Organizations and Congress.

For many veterans facing homelessness, especially against the economic turmoil resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, employment is not achievable without first attaining stable housing. Programs such as SSVF and HUD-VASH have invested in veterans by providing the safety net necessary to receive care and pursue employment and other economic opportunity. Legislation which would make pandemic-relief funding permanent is critical to provide continuity of resources and continuous program improvement.

Measures that have allowed eligible veterans to enter high-paying STEM jobs through VET TEC, rapidly retrain for in-demand fields through VRRAP, and pursue education and resources in new job fields through VR&E, have continued to demonstrate measurable success. It is critical they continue to be resourced, enabled to grow, and tracked through rigorous oversight.

Under the automotive adaptive grant program, VA is authorized to provide a one-time grant toward the purchase of a specially equipped automobile for veterans who need assistance driving due to a service-connected disability. This one-time grant is not enough for these disabled veterans as many struggle to pay out of pocket for the purchase of and modifications for follow-on replacement vehicles. This benefit needs to be improved to reflect the lifecycle of a standard vehicle and the need for consistent independent transportation for disabled veterans.

The shift from in-person to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the inequities between housing allowances for different modalities of instruction. Additionally, for the over 50% of student veterans who report having children, child care needs can affect the ability to persist to graduation. Congress must re-evaluate GI Bill provisions in order to reflect modern student veteran needs, to include allowing National Guard and Reserve service members' increasingly frequent activations to count as time toward GI Bill eligibility.

The VFW urges Congress to:

- Pass S. 1093 to establish a fourth administration in VA with an exclusive focus on economic opportunity benefits in order to provide adequate oversight and resources.
- Pass S. 2172, *Building Solutions for Veterans Experiencing Homelessness Act of 2021*, to continue to resource SSVF and HUD-VASH programs.
- Pass S. 444 / H.R. 1361, *AUTO for Veterans Act*, allowing eligible veterans to receive auto grants every ten years.
- Provide continued funding and rigorous oversight for employment training programs such as VET TEC, VRRAP, and VR&E, that show measurable positive outcomes, to include passing H.R. 2335, *VET TEC Enhancement Act of 2021*.
- Pass legislation that would provide equity in GI Bill benefits for Guard and Reserve members, in-person and online students, and student veterans with child care needs.