

Identifying Congressional and Administrative Priorities for the Next Congress

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Statement of
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Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States

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Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity

With Respect To

Identifying Congressional and Administrative Priorities for the Next Congress

Washington, D.C.

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, 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 VFW priorities before this subcommittee.

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The VFW is interested in a number of veterans' economic opportunity policy initiatives for the next Congress and Administration. Some of the programs discussed herein are embodied in existing legislation that may still be enacted during the 116th Congress. We are looking forward to working with this subcommittee to improve remaining transition, training, and employment benefits in the 117th Congress.

The VFW is also interested in legislation that would permit the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to make essential Information Technology (IT) upgrades. VA's IT infrastructure has had shortcomings for years, especially with education benefits platforms. These inadequacies have led to catastrophic failures such as the GI Bill housing payment issue in fall 2018. It does not matter how capable and dedicated the employees at VA are—if VA is not equipped with adequate IT resources to perform its required tasks, there will inevitably be breakdowns.

Over the past several years, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) has developed and implemented new IT systems to support several program transformations, including the Veterans Benefits Management System, National Work Queue, Case Flow, and eBenefits. Unfortunately, VBA must compete with other offices and agencies within VA for the limited IT funding available each year, delaying the development and deployment of critical IT systems and programming. As a result, critical IT systems are rarely fully developed before business process changes are implemented. Instead, they are phased in over several years, forcing VBA to rely on an inconsistent mix of old and new IT systems, as well as an endless stream of suboptimal workaround solutions. While it may be understandable from a purely budgetary view to stretch out the development and deployment of new IT systems, it is a failure from a functional perspective. Providing only partial IT solutions inevitably results in a loss of productivity and often leads to lower quality and less accurate decisions on claims and appeals for veterans. For example, similar problems caused by inadequately developed technology can be seen in the Veteran Readiness & Employment \$12 million IT debacle, and the education service's continuing problems in making accurate payments under the new GI Bill program.

There are multiple platforms within VA's Education Services (VAES) that need critical IT upgrades: programs that process original and supplemental claims, VAES' interaction with the State Approving Agencies (SAA), VA-ONCE, and its Business Decision Network which is a legacy system years overdue for replacement. These are just some of the platforms within VAES that can be upgraded and streamlined into a single program in order to make customer service more efficient and ultimately save dollars. These legacy programs are

estimated to cost VA approximately 33 million dollars every year.

The VFW proposes the “Digital GI Bill” upgrade as the best cost-efficient upgrade to bring VAES into the 21st century. A one-time infusion of resources for VA’s IT programs specifically aimed at Education Services would overhaul many of the long-needed platforms that office is struggling to maintain, and allow VAES to properly function, instead of consistently requiring workarounds and patchwork solutions to maintain functionality. This proposal is estimated to cost approximately 250 million and be implemented in 12-18 months.

The Digital GI Bill would also be able to accommodate many of the requests Congress and Veterans Service Organizations have been making for years. At the completion of the IT overhaul, VAES would have a cleaner platform to replace VA-ONCE for School Certifying Officials, SAAs, and VA officials, so they can all have the ability to view one screen when interacting with each other instead of only having access to individual platforms. The GI Bill Comparison Tool would be able to be upgraded regularly, instead of housing years-old information that is difficult to corroborate or edit once in place. It would provide a digital Certificate of Eligibility for GI Bill the same way VA Home Loan is an automated process. It would allow for platforms to be introduced that can accommodate the data-sharing agreements between VA and other agencies. And finally, it would be able to track GI Bill users so easier notifications can be made to all benefits users to deliver timely information regarding updates or changes.

The Digital GI Bill upgrade is a long-overdue upgrade to a critical program office within VA. Far too many times we have all collectively overlooked IT resources when it came to new programs and changes within VAES. Just recently, a change to VA Work-Study was passed into law adjusting the payment schedule for work-study recipients. VA does not have a current platform to calculate and deliver those new programs, and no additional IT funding was provided with the change in the program. Far too often we ask for changes within VA and expect the program office to simply make it happen. Unfunded mandates such as the work-study change will lead to VAES trying to create yet another workaround, and to use already overworked and outdated systems to perform new tasks for which they were not intended.

Overlooking IT resources is something we have all done too often, and that practice needs to

change. The VFW asks that every new proposal going forward place an emphasis on IT needs to accomplish said proposal. Minor delays can be avoided by ensuring proper IT funding is added to all new proposals and, hopefully, we will never have to see what took place during the final implementation of the Forever GI Bill.

In order to accomplish the Digital GI Bill upgrade, the VFW proposes authorizing VAES to transfer VA IT funds from already existing IT funds within VA. This would help expedite the upgrade by using existing appropriated funds and utilizing the same workforce to finish the last changes from the Forever GI Bill. Waiting to authorize and appropriate additional funding could delay the implementation of the Digital GI Bill and cost more money in the long run.

VAES is long overdue for not simply an IT upgrade, but an IT overhaul. A project like Digital GI Bill would set VAES up for success for years to come, and potentially head off any delays by ensuring veterans receive their benefits to utilize some truly life-changing programs offered by VA.

The VFW is interested in improving private sector and civilian credentialing for certain military occupational specialties. There are many service members who leave active duty to pursue employment in the same vocations for which they were trained during military service. Unfortunately, this is not usually possible because military training does not align with state-issued professional licenses or trade association credentials. Therefore, it is necessary to explore solutions to ensure that service members receive relevant credentials while on active duty and seamlessly apply for a professional license after they transition from military service.

Research has shown that veterans who hold certificates and certifications generally receive [higher wages](#) than veterans without certificates or certifications, but they often face challenges in translating their military experience to civilian recognition. The Department of Defense (DOD) establishes, measures, and evaluates performance standards for every occupation within the armed forces, providing some of the best vocational training in the nation to its military personnel. Unfortunately, that training is generally not recognized as fulfilling state and private sector certification and licensure requirements for civilian equivalent occupations. This means many former military personnel, certified as proficient in their military occupational specialty, are not recognized as certified or licensed to

perform a comparable job in the civilian workforce.

The VFW, along with our partner organizations in the Independent Budget, recommends that DOD in collaboration with states, unions, and certifying/licensing entities expand its training curriculum to meet the various certification and licensure requirements of applicable civilian equivalent occupations. Congress must facilitate a national dialogue, working closely with DOD, VA and the Department of Labor, as well as state governments, employers, trade unions, and licensure and credentialing entities, to establish clear processes so that military training meets civilian certification and licensure requirements for the states in which veterans choose to live once they leave military service.

Additionally, the VFW is concerned about unemployment of military spouses. The Bureau of Labor Statistics does not track statistics on military spouse employment, but other organizations [estimate this rate is as high as 26 percent](#), which is more than [seven times the national average](#). Underemployment estimates among military spouses are as high as 51 percent. Many of these men and women move from state to state with their service member spouse, so having interstate agreements for licensing portability would help support employment for military spouses.

During the 117th Congress, the VFW asks this subcommittee to work with the various stakeholders involved in licensing and credentialing to improve transferability, and reciprocity of these important tools for employment. The VFW would like to increase funding for and expand clinics that provide legal services to indigent veterans. A number of bills were introduced during the 116th Congress that would permit VA to partner with university law school programs and other entities that provide pro bono legal services to veterans. However, other long-standing federally funded initiatives already serve this need.

For example, the AmeriCorps Equal Justice Works program, funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service, provides legal services to low-income and homeless veterans across the United States. Equal Justice Works has partnered with numerous nonprofit organizations and educational institutions that provide these legal services. The VFW urges Congress to increase funding for AmeriCorps legal services programs that specifically benefit homeless veterans. Additionally, an initiative should be created to form a partnership between VA and AmeriCorps to improve outreach to homeless veterans and to permit legal workshops to convene at VA facilities. There are many pro bono legal services

offered to veterans, but there is no centralized location to offer these services. Using VA facilities to conduct these workshops would greatly help the outreach and effectiveness of these legal services for veterans.

Additionally, the VFW is interested in legislation that would improve VA's automobile allowance program. VA is authorized to provide a one-time grant of \$21,488.29 to veterans who are unable to drive due to a service-connected disability. This grant may be used for the purchase of a specially equipped automobile.

Since the automobile allowance is a one-time benefit, veterans who have previously received a grant must pay any expenses associated with the purchase of a new vehicle themselves. The cost of replacing a modified automobile with a used or new vehicle ranges from \$21,000 to \$65,000, which is a substantial sum for most consumers. These substantial costs, coupled with inflation, present a financial hardship for many disabled veterans who need to replace their primary mode of transportation once it reaches its life of service. Accordingly, the VFW believes veterans should be permitted to receive an automobile grant every ten years in an amount equal to the grant maximum at the time of vehicle replacement.

Furthermore, the VFW would like to pursue strategies to help reduce the number of homeless veterans across the country. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program is an incredibly vital tool in keeping our veterans off the streets. A common complaint the VFW has heard is the workload for the current case managers is too burdensome. The *Reducing Veteran Homelessness Act of 2020* would remedy this issue by clearing pathways for additional employment opportunities within the HUD-VASH management program.

The VFW urges Congress to make additional improvements to the HUD-VASH program. Veterans fortunate enough to obtain HUD-VASH vouchers also face difficulties. VFW service officers in various cities have reported that homeless veterans sometimes prefer sleeping under a bridge rather than living in the unsafe neighborhoods for which their vouchers are eligible. HUD-VASH vouchers must provide veterans the opportunity to live in safe and secure housing.

The VFW also believes there should be a delay in the timeline for enrollment in the Montgomery GI Bill. The first few days of recruit training is a chaotic period, and it is not the time to discuss the specific differences between education benefits. According to the DOD, approximately 80 percent of all new service members still pay into the Montgomery GI Bill program. Of those service members, only a fraction utilize the benefit. The Forever GI Bill is earned through time in service and does not require any money to be paid out of pocket to receive this incredible benefit. While the Montgomery GI Bill can be beneficial to some veterans, it requires a \$1,200 buy-in and in many cases is not nearly as robust a benefit as the Forever GI Bill. Many VFW members have stated if they knew more about the Montgomery GI Bill, they may not have opted to pay \$1,200 for a program they would never use. Accordingly, it is necessary to allow service members additional time to understand the nuances between the two chapters of the GI Bill, and decide if they should opt in for both. The VFW recommends delaying the enrollment of Montgomery GI Bill until 180 days after enlistment when most service members are at their Advanced Training School or at their initial unit.

The VFW believes the current scale for GI Bill Military Housing Allowance (MHA) does not offer parity for students attending school online. The current payment rate of GI Bill MHA for students attending school exclusively through Online Training is half the national average. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic pushed most education classes to an online-only format for certain periods of time. This highlighted the need to revamp the Basic Allowance for Housing payment scale for Online Training. The VFW recommends a standardized payment model for all online education training that sets a standard rate closer to the in-person payment rates for all GI Bill beneficiaries utilizing online or distance learning. Online platforms for learning have evolved much closer to the in-person classroom experience in recent years. While the VFW still believes in-person classes offer many tangible and intangible advantages, the development of online platforms has significantly closed the gap between online-only and in-person classes.

For years the VFW has supported legislation that would end the 12-year limitation on eligibility for Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E). The VR&E program provides critical counseling and other adjunct services necessary to enable service-disabled veterans to overcome barriers as they prepare for, find, and maintain gainful employment. It is an effective means of ensuring that service-disabled veterans remain employed in meaningful careers. This program has the added benefit of increasing the size of the federal income tax base.

Participating in the workforce provides a sense of purpose and is essential for an individual's well-being. The VFW frequently hears from veterans who did not use their VR&E benefits during the 12-year eligibility window and likewise have difficulty securing employment. This problem has become more acute with the speed at which technology and the skills required to compete in the labor market evolve. Service-disabled veterans must have the opportunity to use VR&E services at any point during their employable lives when their disabilities interfere with employment and when economic changes require them to learn new skills.

Lastly, the VFW would like to see the creation of a Fourth Administration, specifically an Economic Opportunity Administration. The current resources of VBA are dominated by Compensation and Pension, as they should be. However, the importance of the readjustment benefits within VBA deserve their own focus on resources and attention. An Economic Opportunity Administration would allow for all of the forward-looking benefits administered through VA to be the main focus of an Under Secretary, and hopefully allow this new administration to be the sole recipient of vital resources such as IT funding, instead of sharing with Compensation and Pension.

Chairman Levin, this concludes my testimony. I am prepared to answer 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 2020, 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.