

Economic Opportunity

The VFW's Concerns:

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is comprised of three administrations. The Veterans Benefits Administration has the most varied responsibilities of the three, overseeing the delivery of compensation and pension benefits, the GI Bill, Veteran Readiness & Employment (VR&E), the Transition Assistance Program, and VA home 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.

Programs for eligible veterans to enter high-paying STEM jobs via Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC), and pursue education and resources in new job fields or self-employment through VR&E, have continued to demonstrate measurable success. It is critical that these employment programs continue to be resourced, shared widely, made accessible to eligible veterans, and tracked through rigorous oversight.

The shift from in-person to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted both the inequities between housing allowances for different models of instruction and the need for permanent protections for students in cases of national emergency. National Guard and Reserve service members also face inequity when their increasingly frequent activations often do not count toward GI Bill eligibility. Additionally, for the over fifty percent 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 to represent modern student veterans to ensure eligibility and allowances provide parity for all students and provide coverage for their most basic needs.

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 to follow-on replacement vehicles. This benefit needs to be improved to match the life cycle of a standard vehicle and the need for consistent independent transportation for disabled veterans.

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 H.R. 1361 / S. 444, *AUTO for Veterans Act*, allowing eligible veterans to receive auto grants every ten years.
- Provide continued funding and rigorous oversight for employment training programs that show measurable outcomes such as the Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program (VRRAP), VR&E, and VET TEC, 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, to include S. 2644, *GRAD VA Educational Assistance Parity Act of 2021*.