

September 14, 2018

Secretary Robert Wilkie  
US Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Ave, NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

The undersigned military and veterans service organizations, representing millions of veterans, service members, their families, and survivors, write to express our disappointment over ongoing information technology (IT) issues impacting GI Bill students' Monthly Housing Allowances (MHA). Given the significant impact monthly housing allowances have on the lives of over one million veterans and families, we urge swift attention and oversight from your office into the issues surrounding the Office of Information and Technology (OI&T).

The *Harry W. Colmery Act*, better known as the Forever GI Bill, included several provisions aimed at addressing inequities in the MHA students receive. These changes require significant modifications to the existing education IT systems, but nearly six weeks after the August 1 implementation date, and nearly a month into the Fall 2018 semester, the IT systems are still failing. VA should immediately address the following:

**Correct and prompt payments.** The failure of VA's OI&T to institute a timely software update to VA's Long Term Solution (LTS) claims processing system are negatively affecting the accuracy of payments sent to students and schools. These incorrect payments are asking veterans, their families, and schools to bear the burden of VA's problems. The consequences of this burden on students and higher education institutions lead to heavy financial burdens. Institutions of higher learning rely on timely and accurate payments from VA to cover the cost of tuition for students. Furthermore, students rely on MHA to pay for their living expenses such as rent, utilities, and food.

**Greater Communication.** Transparent communication from VA on these issues have been woefully lacking. It took several weeks into the current semester before any communication was sent to students and schools have received little information beyond "wait and see." Transparency on what to expect and when to expect it, from all levels of leadership at VA, is critical to helping students and schools make informed decisions.

**Reassurance on payment issues.** VA has stated they will not collect overpayments and will rectify underpayments in cases due only to these IT delays. VA should strongly stress to students and schools that they will not bear any undue financial burden for VA OI&T's delays and should apply a liberal standard to the reason behind incorrect payments.

**Upcoming changes.** Given VA has struggled to reach its goals of implementing section 107 of the Forever GI Bill in addition to the regular, annual updates to MHA by August 1, we are concerned about VA's ability to implement additional sections requiring IT upgrades. VA has the opportunity to get ahead of the next round of updates and we urge strong leadership and oversight over the implementation of this provision.

We appreciate the dedication and attention given by VA toward implementing the majority of Forever GI Bill's 34 provisions on time. The Veterans Benefits Administration office of Education Service has been consistently proactive in communicating to stakeholders on issues related to the timely and effective implementation of these provisions. However, the inability by VA OI&T to adequately and timely meet the requirements of the law to support VBA's requirements – especially one that affects a veterans' wellbeing during school - is an organizational and customer service failure at the highest level. They have left students and schools confused, with improper payments, and absent a clearly articulated timeline for when these issues will be fixed. We also acknowledge it is imperative VA receive the necessary resources to have an effective IT system that supports all of its constituents; we encourage Congress to work quickly to meet those needs.

Students, schools, and taxpayers need assurances and answers to how this will be resolved and prevented in the future. We look forward to continuing working together with VA to resolve these issues.

Sincerely,

Joseph Chenelly  
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AMVETS National Headquarters

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Sergeant Major, U.S. Army (Retired)  
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Barry Schneider  
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