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**TESTIMONY OF
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BEFORE THE

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

OVERSIGHT HEARING ON THE TOPIC OF:

"FISCAL YEAR 2019 BUDGET SUBMISSION OF THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS"

MARCH 15, 2018



Chairmen Arrington and Bost, Ranking Members O'Rourke and Esty, and Members of the Subcommittees:

Thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit our testimony on the fiscal year 2019 budget submission of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). With over 1,500 chapters advocating on behalf of over one million student veterans in schools across the country, we are pleased to share the perspective of those directly impacted by the budget request concerning these subcommittees.

Established in 2008, SVA has grown to become a force and voice for the interests of veterans in higher education. With a myriad of programs supporting their success, rigorous research on ways to improve the landscape, and advocacy throughout the nation, we place the student veteran at the top of our organizational pyramid. As the future leaders of this country, fostering the success of veterans in school is paramount in their preparation for productive and impactful lives.

We will discuss our general concerns with the current budgetary process' impact on student veterans, concerns specific to VA's budget request, and suggestions to strengthen how VA supports student veterans.

The Current Budget Process

Concerns with the lack of regular order around the budget and appropriations processes are consistent talking points among the larger veteran advocacy community, and even more broadly throughout Washington; nevertheless, the need for consistent and predictable government funding is more than worth reiterating. Even with VA's robust advance appropriation funding cycle, the step-and-repeat of continuing resolutions and looming threats of government shutdowns leave student veterans with many questions and uncertainty, with recent examples demonstrating the timeliness of these discussions¹.

Student veterans and their families frequently interact with multiple government agencies, which makes the need for reliable government funding an issue that transcends the silos of VA. The recently passed Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 is an appreciated first step towards resolving that uncertainty.

As the next iteration of funding requirements comes due in the immediate days, assuming it is not resolved by the time of today's hearing, we hope to see continued bipartisan compromise. We also applaud the full committee's continued commitment to ensure VA's budget, and the programs and services veterans use across government, remains a priority for the whole of Congress.

Readjustment Benefits and Education Services in VA's Budget Request

Through a combination of funding sources, the majority of which is newly appropriated funds, VA's budget request calls for an estimated \$15.5 billion in Readjustment Benefits obligations in 2019 and \$16.1 billion in Readjustment Benefits obligations in 2020². This does not include discretionary funds necessary to administer these benefits.

Largely comprised of the education benefits Education Services manages, Readjustment Benefits serve as some of the most proactive and empowering benefits available to veterans and their families. Readjustment benefits

¹ See Emily Wax-Thibodeaux, *11,000 disabled student veterans left without rent and expense money due to computer glitch*, THE WASHINGTON POST, Feb. 2, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2018/02/02/11000-disabled-student-veterans-left-without-rent-and-expense-money-due-to-computer-glitch/?utm_term=.4cf294f50380. Natalie Gross, *Here's what a government shutdown could mean for GI Bill users*, MILITARY TIMES, Jan. 19, 2018, <https://www.militarytimes.com/education-transition/education/2018/01/19/heres-what-a-government-shutdown-could-mean-for-gi-bill-users/>.

² U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Budget. *FY 2019 Budget Submission*. Available: <https://www.va.gov/budget/products.asp>



equip veterans to return to the civilian workforce as the leaders and problem-solvers upon which the future of our country's economic prosperity desperately depends.

Through increased access to and participation in these benefits, budget obligations continue to increase. We encourage the subcommittees to think of Readjustment Benefits as an integral part of the whole of VA when advocating for appropriated funds— a macroeconomic net benefit in the truest sense of the concept. While healthcare and disability compensation make up part of VA's foundational services, Readjustment Benefits are also a cornerstone of VA's foundation.

As noted during our *State of Student Veterans of America* delivered at the 2018 SVA National Conference³, the original GI Bill opened up higher education to all Americans. Prior to 1944, if you were trying to go to school in America, it would have been difficult; less than seven percent of Americans in 1944 had a bachelor's degree at the time. The GI Bill changed that by educating 49 percent of returning World War II veterans from Europe and the Pacific.

These amazing women and men returned to the college campuses on the GI Bill and led the democratization of higher education⁴. The Readjustment Benefits in place today build on that storied history. They are at the core of what VA does best for veterans and this country; we strongly encourage Congress to remember the importance of Readjustment Benefits and Education Services when defining priorities and aligning resources.

Vocational Rehabilitation and Education (VR&E) in VA's Budget Request

The VR&E program provides services to veterans with service-connected disabilities to prepare, find, and maintain employment. Currently, VR&E rehabilitation services provide veterans five tracks to employment, including employment through long-term services. This track largely focuses on the necessary training and education needed to meet a veteran's employment goals⁵. According to VA's budget request, the VR&E program will see an increase in program participation and administration resource needs over the next two years⁶.

SVA is currently tracking concerns student veterans express with the VR&E program to better understand how the program could be strengthened. A theme throughout the concerns collected so far rests largely with the large caseloads Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (VRC) must manage, the inconsistent VRC decisions, and frequent turnover of VRCs⁷. We believe it is necessary to meet the current appropriations demand that VA outlined; however, Congress should also address some of the underlying resource issues⁸ that are contributing to those concerns and proactively improve the VR&E program.

Given the highly individualized nature of the program, there is strong need to ensure proper VRC to veteran ratios as mandated in Public Law 114-223, which requires one full-time employment equivalent (FTEE) for every 125 veterans⁹. It is unclear if those ratios are being met and we encourage these subcommittees to hold VA

³ Jared Lyon, *Defining Our Future: Today's Scholars, Tomorrow's Leaders*, Jan. 5, 2018, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/defining-our-future-todays-scholars-tomorrows-leaders-jared-lyon/?trackingId=KSFiiL2kVI8OVnbMoFiu1g%3D%3D>

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, *Eligibility and Entitlement*, VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AND EMPLOYMENT (VR&E), https://www.benefits.va.gov/vocrehab/eligibility_and_entitlement.asp.

⁶ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Budget. *FY 2019 Budget Submission*. Available: <https://www.va.gov/budget/products.asp>

⁷ Paul R. Varela, "A Review of VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program," HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY, July 8, 2015, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-114hhrg98685/pdf/CHRG-114hhrg98685.pdf> (turnover discussion on pg. 18).

⁸ Benjamin L. Krause, J.D., *National Association of Veterans Program Administrators (NAVPA) Statement for Hearing – "A Review of VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program,"* HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS, July 8, 2015, <https://archives-veterans.house.gov/submission-for-the-record/mr-benjamin-l-krause-jd>.

⁹ Continuing Appropriations and Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2017" Public Law 114-223, <https://www.congress.gov/114/plaws/publ223/PLAW-114publ223.pdf>.



accountable to that ratio in their budget request. We strongly urge this committee to encourage VA to increase the capped pay of VRCs¹⁰ to match higher salary caps of similar Department of Education positions to aid in the turnover of VRCs¹¹.

Forever GI Bill Implementation in VA's Budget Request

Last summer, SVA led a coalition of more than 60 organizations to pass the most expansive higher education legislation in nearly a decade, and also the largest improvement of the Post-9/11 GI Bill—the Forever GI Bill. Signed into law on August 16, 2017, the Forever GI Bill – officially titled the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Education Assistance Act¹² – made history¹³ thanks to this committee and the current congress.

The Forever GI Bill includes dozens of provisions that increase access to higher education, reduce inequities within the benefit, and turn the GI Bill into a benefit of service far beyond the current generation. Thirteen of the law's provisions are already in effect and benefiting student veterans across the country; the majority of the law's provisions will take effect this August. While SVA was proud to work alongside many members of these subcommittees and their staffs to pass the Forever GI Bill, we remain concerned about the law's successful implementation, which must include sufficient appropriations and continued vigilance to the implementation process¹⁴.

SVA commends VA and its dedicated staff for the ongoing robust public outreach effort to make those affected aware and a clear dedication to successfully implementing the Forever GI Bill. However, as detailed in VA's budget request¹⁵, VA needs sufficient resources appropriated to meet that goal. Specifically, while we appreciated the Forever GI Bill's language authorizing funds to meet some of the IT needs to implement the new law, these funds have yet to be appropriated. We encourage the inclusion of such appropriations to meet that need as soon as possible given the short implementation window student veterans are facing.

Additionally, several of the provisions – such as the benefit restoration for school closures – require new oversight responsibilities that cannot be automated. Others, such as the Purple Heart expansion, are likely to result in increased GI Bill usage. These increased oversight functions and expected growth in usage, and implementing the law generally, will require new staff to keep processing times from increasing. SVA encourages including sufficient appropriations to meet VA's expected staffing needs.

Strengthening VA to Support Student Veterans

SVA is a solution-oriented organization and we appreciate the willingness to collaboratively address our concerns alongside the members of these subcommittees. Our concerns with VA's budget request have a common dominator: at present, VA is lacking formal leadership on behalf of economic opportunity programs. To be clear,

¹⁰ Glassdoor, *US Department of Veterans Affairs Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Salaries*, https://www.glassdoor.com/Salary/US-Department-of-Veterans-Affairs-Vocational-Rehabilitation-Counselor-Salaries-E41429_D_KO34,69.htm (Indicating range of salaries from \$49,799-\$95,000 based on salary reports and statistical methods).

¹¹ See generally National Association of Veterans' Program Administrators, *2017 NAVPA Legislative Agenda*, <http://www.navpa.org/2017-navpa-legislative-agenda/>.

¹² Harry W. Colmery Veterans Education Assistance Act of 2017. Pub. L 115-48. 16 August 2017. Available: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/3218>

¹³ Gross, Natalie (2017). Military Times. "Trump signed the 'Forever GI Bill.' Here are 11 things you should know", <https://www.militarytimes.com/education-transition/education/2017/08/16/trump-signed-the-forever-gi-bill-here-are-11-things-you-should-know/>

¹⁴ Hubbard, William, *Testimony for Legislative Hearing on the Topic Of "An Update on the Implementation of the Forever GI Bill,"* Dec. 12, 2017, HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR10/20171212/106695/HHRG-115-VR10-Wstate-HubbardW-20171212.pdf>.

¹⁵ Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Budget. *FY 2019 Budget Submission*. Available: <https://www.va.gov/budget/products.asp>



this is not a lack of leadership due to personality, but instead a void of a sufficient leadership role for such programs in VA's current enterprise structure.

Economic opportunity programs, largely comprised of readjustment benefits, should be thought of as an integral part of the empowering, whole health model of care VA prioritizes. Programs encompassed under the economic opportunity umbrella, like the GI Bill and home loan guarantees, are proven success stories that not only benefit veterans but the larger American economy.

Specifically looking at the GI Bill, last year SVA released the *National Veteran Education Success Tracker* (NVEST)¹⁶ in partnership with VA, which focuses on outcomes of student veterans and demonstrates the return on investment of student veterans. The first of its kind, it studied 854,000 individual records – every Post-9/11 GI Bill user from 2009 until the summer of 2015 – and showed the success of student veterans on campus.

The NVEST¹⁷ report outlines the many ways student veterans outperform their peers on campus. From higher grade point averages, a higher success rate, and a propensity to obtain degrees in high demand fields, the data makes clear student veterans are worth the investment America has made in them through the GI Bill.

It is for these reasons SVA strongly supports the creation of a new administration within VA, named the Veteran Economic Opportunity Administration, that would include Undersecretary-level representation for programs supporting economic opportunities and transitions of veterans and their families. We feel this new administration would be a refocusing of existing resources that modernizes VA and creates greater accountability for economic opportunity and transition programs. SVA's detailed support for this new administration will be the focus of upcoming testimony on pending legislation.

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We thank the Chairmen, Ranking Members, and the Subcommittees members for your time, attention, and devotion to the cause of veterans in higher education. As always, we welcome your feedback and questions, and we look forward to continuing to work with these subcommittees, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, and the entire Congress to ensure the success of all generations of veterans through education.

¹⁶ Cate, C. A., Lyon, J. S., Schmeling, J., & Bogue, B. Y. (2017). *National Veteran Education Success Tracker: A report on the academic success of student-veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill*. Washington, D.C.

¹⁷ *Id.*



Information Required by Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, SVA has not received any federal grants in Fiscal Year 2018, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.



**Lauren Augustine,
Director of Policy**

After graduating from Virginia Tech, Lauren enlisted in the U.S. Army, quickly rising to the rank of sergeant, and served 12 months in Iraq with the First Infantry Division. She has worked as a senior legislative associate for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, a legislative representative for the American Federation of Government Employees, and the director of government relations for Got Your 6. In these positions she advocated on behalf of veterans, their families, and the services and benefits provided by VA.

In recognition of her advocacy work, Lauren was named to the HillVets Top 100 in 2015 and awarded the Excellence by An Up and Coming Practitioner award from the Women in Professional Advocacy in 2016. She was also appointed to the Joint Leadership Council of Veteran Service Organizations for the Commonwealth of Virginia by Governor McAuliffe in 2016.