



**TESTIMONY OF
STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA**

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEES ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

AND

TECHNOLOGY MODERNIZATION

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

HEARING ON THE TOPIC OF:

“FURTHER EXAMINING FOREVER GI BILL IMPLEMENTATION EFFORTS”

November 19, 2019



Chairman Levin, Chairwoman Lee, Ranking Member Bilirakis, Ranking Member Banks, and Members of the Subcommittees:

Thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit our testimony on the ongoing Forever GI Bill implementation efforts.

With more than 1,500 chapters representing nearly one million student veterans, service members, families, and survivors using Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits in schools across the country, we are pleased to share the perspective of those directly impacted by the in the implementation of sections 107 and 501 of the Forever GI Bill.

Established in 2008, SVA has grown to become a force and voice for the interests of veterans in higher education. Student Veterans of America places the student veteran at the top of our organizational pyramid by conducting rigorous research on student veterans, providing a myriad of programs supporting their success, and advocating for improvements to veterans benefits and higher education policy. As the future leaders of this country, and some of the most successful students in higher education, it is imperative that we foster the success of veterans in school to prepare them for productive and impactful lives.¹

Edward Everett, our nation's 20th Secretary of State, and the former President of Harvard University was famously quoted as stating, "Education is a better safeguard of liberty than a standing army." While we have the finest military the world has ever known, the sentiment remains; the importance of education to our country's national security continues to be critical. Ensuring the success of student veterans on campus must first start with ensuring they have reliable and timely access to their earned education benefits.

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Background

The *Harry W. Colmery Educational Assistance Act*, more commonly known as the Forever GI Bill, was signed into law in August of 2017 and created the largest expansion of education benefits for veterans in nearly a decade.² The 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. Nearly all the law's provisions are already in effect and benefiting student veterans across the country.

While SVA was proud to work alongside many members of this subcommittee and their staffs to pass the Forever GI Bill, we remain watchful of the law's ongoing implementation of the provisions aimed at addressing inequities in the Monthly Housing Allowance (MHA) students receive. The Spring 2020 semester will be a crucial indicator of this process, as the new MHA provisions should have taken effect by this date.

In several oversight hearings this Committee held over the past year, senior VA officials assured the nation's student veterans and this Congress that late payments and failures associated with a lack of accountability at VA have been sufficiently addressed.³ At the time, student veterans expressed the dire straits of the situation, noting, "I'm about to lose everything that I own and become homeless. I don't want to be that veteran on the street

¹ Shane, Leo. Military Times. Report: Young vets are more successful than their civilian peers. July 29, 2017. <https://www.militarytimes.com/veterans/2017/07/29/report-young-vets-are-more-successful-than-their-civilian-peers/>

² Harry W. Colmery Veterans Education Assistance Act of 2017 §108. Pub. L 115-48. (2017). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115thcongress/house-bill/3218>.

³ Wentling, Nikki, "Federal watchdog: VA leadership failures are to blame for GI Bill payment issues," March 21, 2019, <https://www.stripes.com/federal-watchdog-va-leadership-failures-are-to-blame-for-gi-bill-payment-issues-1.573672>



begging for change because I haven't received what I was promised."⁴

In response to a March 2018 focus group outlining VA's plan to use zip codes to calculate campus-based MHA rates as required by section 107 of the law, SVA raised concerns in an April letter with the planned strategy and the potential roadblocks we saw with VA's plans. Our concerns centered around the use of zip codes to define campus location instead of existing Department of Education coding mechanisms and the unintended consequences that could create.⁵

As late as a July 2018 hearing before this Committee, there was a reassurance by VA that the IT updates needed to implement the MHA changes would be ready soon. However, by early August it became clear VA would not only miss the Forever GI Bill implementation deadlines because of continued IT challenges, but routine updates to MHA calculations – such as cost-of-living adjustments – would also not be calculated for the Fall semester leading to inaccurate or significantly delayed payments. Only after SVA, alongside other veteran serving organizations (VSO), made clear the urgency of proceeding with certification and communicating the direction to proceed did VA make those communications, as detailed below.

Beginning in September last year, SVA began to hear from student veterans that MHA payments were missing or inaccurate. On September 14, 2018, SVA along with fourteen other VSOs wrote VA to express our disappointment and concern over the continued IT failures and the lack of transparent communication on the issue to students and stakeholders.⁶ By mid-October, VA sent letters and emails to all GI Bill users, issued several statements online, and took internal steps to address the backlog.⁷

Then, in November 2018, VA announced a "reset" of the implementation process, establishing a new deadline of December 1, 2019, and returning students to the uncapped Department of Defense (DoD) housing rates until the Spring 2020 semester. These rates were based on the school's administrative campus location, not the location where each student takes their classes as VA was planning to do. Essentially, housing allowances were processed as they were before the Forever GI Bill became law while VA worked to get their systems and processes working properly.

Now, with the "reset" deadline two weeks away, VA will complete the final testing phases for the implementation of the remaining sections of the Forever GI Bill. These changes redefine their interpretation of "campus" location to reduce administrative burdens on students, schools, and VA, and retroactively correct any underpayments students saw during from the Fall 2018 semester onward based on the uncapped DoD rates. VA will also not collect debts from any students overpaid due to the change in rate calculations.

VA Outreach and Communication

SVA commends VA and its staff for improving public outreach efforts to spread awareness, and we commend the obvious dedication to successfully implementing the Forever GI Bill. In our November 2018 testimony before this Committee, our primary recommendation was to provide more consistent and transparent communication to students, school staff, and stakeholders working alongside students during dynamic situations such as these

⁴ McCausland, Phil, NBC News, Veterans haven't received GI Bill benefits for months due to ongoing IT issues at VA, Nov. 11, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/veterans-haven-t-receive-gi-bill-benefits-months-due-ongoing-n934696>

⁵ Student Veterans of America. SVA Response to VA's Campus Definition. <https://studentveterans.org/images/pdf/will/SVA-Response-to-VAsCampus-Definition.pdf>

⁶ Student Veterans of America. VSO Response to Forever GI Bill IT Delays. https://studentveterans.org/images/pdf/will/Forever-GI-BillDelays_VSO-Letter-.pdf

⁷ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Benefits Administration. Education and Training. <https://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/>



delays. All stakeholders in this process have a vested interest in transparent and timely communication. It is important that VA acknowledge potential issues and proactively communicate those issues and ways to address them in a timely manner so that students, schools, and other stakeholders can make informed decisions about their education and finances.

Anecdotally, SVA is hearing generally positive feedback from student veterans and School Certifying Officials (SCOs) regarding VA's communications for upcoming changes to the MHA. While it may be too early to tell, we are hopeful that these comments are representative of the experience stakeholders will have once the Spring 2020 semester starts. It is critical that the lines of communication between VA and stakeholders remain open following the December 1 deadline to communicate concerns and, if new problems arise, ensure they are addressed immediately.

One such concern that was recently reported to SVA concerns the SCO hotline at VA. SCOs call into this dedicated hotline for assistance only to be met with frequent claims by VA support staff of missing or unavailable information, lack of access to relevant data, or lack of knowledge or adequate training to answer the SCOs' questions. These hotline employees apparently do not receive training on the VA ONCE system – one of the primary methods for SCOs submit student GI Bill certification documents to VA. VA's employee training in this area should be reviewed and enhanced to better serve SCOs and, in turn, our student veterans.

Lastly, in addition to the generally positive feedback from SCOs, SVA has received limited reports from SCOs about workload and communication concerns, particularly related to new extension campus requirements. The ability of SCOs to perform their job duties is critical to SVAs mission of helping student veterans and military-connected students succeed in higher education. We encourage the Committee to work with organizations like the National Association of Veterans' Program Administrators (NAVPA) to better understand these concerns and to address them in an efficient and effective manner.

SVA remains committed to working closely with our partners, Congress, and VA to monitor and improve the implementation process. To that end, SVA believes VA should answer several outstanding questions to clarify any remaining ambiguity that exists for stakeholders.

Outstanding Questions

1. *What does VA need to commit to a comprehensive modernization of its education benefit IT infrastructure?*

The issues with the VA's antiquated IT systems and their conflicts with modern coding remain. These problems will continue to negatively impact VA's administration of educational benefits. SVA encourages VA to pledge to modernize its outdated education benefit IT systems.

2. *Will the payments be retroactive to August 1, 2018 and be calculated through the date of the new IT system implementation, which is currently set for December 1, 2019?*

While the Secretary's announcement last November made clear the VA would calculate underpayments owed to students based on Forever GI Bill requirements, it was less clear on the specific dates those underpayments would honor. The statement said: "To clear up any confusion, I want to make clear that each and every post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiary will be made 100 percent whole – retroactively if need be – for their housing benefits for this academic year based on Forever GI Bill rates, not on post-9/11 GI Bill rates."

VA should articulate to all stakeholders how payments were or will be calculated back to August 1, 2018 for



all terms that were underpaid, as the law requires. Further, VA should clarify the status of any ongoing correction payments that stem from the pause on routine adjustments, like cost-of-living, which has been in place while VA makes improvements to its systems and processes in advance of the December 1, 2018 deadline. If VA resumes routine adjustments for Spring 2020, SVA expects VA will have to make retroactive payments that account for the lack of such adjustments for all academic terms beginning Spring 2019 through Fall 2019.

3. *How will the VA prevent another backlog when they process both new claims and prior underpayments?*

We also acknowledge VA has made progress with recently implemented policies to adjudicate its oldest claims and increased the total number of claims processing staff to address the backlog, but we remain concerned about the potential number of claims that will need to be processed for underpayments. This number could be staggering once you add up the several semesters that have come and gone before the new IT system is live.

Processing those underpayments will be in addition to the normal claims processing required for current and new GI Bill students. A realistic plan to process both the underpayments and the current claims with sufficient resources, both in manpower and infrastructure, to prevent any sort of backlog or delay in payments is critical. This must also include any burden on SCOs for processing prior underpayments if there is a requirement for their intervention.

There are many, both in Congress and among the veteran community, ready and willing to advocate for what VA needs to best serve student veterans, but we must first know what those needs are – both from an authorization and appropriations standpoint – for VA to meet this mission. VA will have to move quickly on these asks if they hope to have resources committed in time to meet its upcoming needs.

4. *How will VA communicate updates and progress?*

One of the biggest frustrations during the GI Bill payment delays experienced this past year was the lack of clear and timely communication from VA on what was happening, what they were doing, and what students and schools should do if they needed help or more information. SVA has heard reports of significant improvement in this area, but the need to always strive to improve communication cannot be stressed enough as the last provisions roll out to student veterans everywhere.

These delays had significant financial impact on student veterans, varying in severity, with no ability of student veterans to predict when their claims would be processed, and payment received. This impacted some students' plans for continuing in higher education, their housing, their ability to pay bills, incurring late payment fees with their colleges for tuition, books, or fees, and even negatively impacting their credit reports. Regardless of the extent of this problem, or its severity, there is no question there was impact that was not addressed well, and it must not re-occur.

Consistent, clear, and timely communication from VA will be the best way to ensure it has what it needs following the December 1, 2019 deadline and to keep students, schools, and stakeholders supportive. Additionally, continuing to examine how to insure more accurate contact information is a longstanding goal VA should continue to work towards that will ultimately aid in all VA's communication efforts.

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The success of veterans in higher education is no mistake or coincidence. Research consistently demonstrates this unique population of non-traditional students is far outpacing their peers in many measures of academic performance.⁸

Further, this success in higher education begets success in careers, in communities, and promotes family financial stability, holistic well-being, and provides the all-volunteer force with powerful tools for recruitment and retention. At our 10th annual national conference in 2018, the President and CEO of SVA, Jared Lyon, shared the story behind the quote on our anniversary challenge coin, "Some attribute the following text to Thucydides and others note that it's a paraphrase of a book written by Sir William Francis Butler from the late 1800's. The reality, either way, rings as true today as it ever has, and the phrase goes like this, 'The nation that makes a great distinction between its scholars and its warriors will have its thinking done by cowards and its fighting done by fools.'"⁹

Supporting that success is paramount, and it starts with providing necessary resources and abilities at VA to successfully manage education benefits. We commend VA's commitment to ensuring these remaining provisions of the Forever GI Bill are finally implemented successfully and hope to see continued efforts to ensure seamless transition into higher education continue while also advocating for improvements to help meet that same goal.

We thank the Chairman, Chairwoman, Ranking Members, and the Committee 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 this Committee and the entire Congress to ensure the success of all generations of veterans through education.

⁸ 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. Student Veterans of America, Washington, D.C., http://nvest.studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/NVEST-Report_FINAL.pdf.

⁹ Jared Lyon, Defining Our Future: Today's Scholars, Tomorrow's Leaders, Jan. 5, 2018, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/defining-our-futuretodays-scholars-tomorrows-leaders-jared-lyon>