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**TESTIMONY OF  
MR. WILLIAM HUBBARD  
CHIEF OF STAFF  
STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA**

**BEFORE THE**

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

**HEARING ON THE TOPIC OF:  
"FISCAL YEAR 2020 PRESIDENT'S BUDGET:  
REQUESTS RELATED TO VETERANS' READJUSTMENT BENEFITS"**

**APRIL 30, 2019**



Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit our testimony on the fiscal year 2020 budget submission of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Established in 2008, SVA is a national nonprofit founded to empower student veterans as they transition to civilian life by providing them with the resources, network support, and advocacy needed to succeed in higher education.

With over 1,500 Campus Chapters across the U.S. and in four countries overseas, serving over 750,000 student veterans and military-connected students, SVA establishes a lifelong commitment to each student's success, from campus life to employment, through local leadership workshops, national conferences, and top-tier employer relations. As the largest chapter-based student organization in America, we are a force and voice for the interests of veterans in higher education, and SVA places the student veteran at the top of our organizational pyramid.

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 that the world has ever known, the sentiment remains; the importance of education to our nation's national security continues to be critical.

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.

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### **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 discussions.<sup>1</sup>

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 need for regular order is especially apparent when considering the cycle of GI Bill payments, which typically ebb and flow in conjunction with the beginning of each semester. The ability of the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) to project upcoming increases in demand for GI Bill approvals is indirectly linked to appropriate IT funding, as we publicly witnessed during the rollout of several crucial provisions of the Forever GI Bill.<sup>2,3</sup>

SVA supports the recommendation of the Independent Budget to include an additional \$50 million for IT infrastructure.<sup>4</sup> We 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.

<sup>1</sup> 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](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).

<sup>2</sup> 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>

<sup>3</sup> 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/>.

<sup>4</sup> The Independent Budget: Budget Recommendations Fiscal Years 2020 and 2021, Feb. 11, 2019. <http://www.independentbudget.org/pdf/funding.pdf>



## 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 \$14.06 billion in Readjustment Benefits obligations in 2020 and \$12.58 billion in Readjustment Benefits obligations in 2021.<sup>5</sup> These figures do not include discretionary funds necessary to administer these benefits.

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

SVA acknowledges VA's justification for reducing their baseline personal services budget line item from \$190.5 million in 2019 to \$183.8 million in the 2020 request due to a cut in Forever GI Bill implementation support staff. However, until the new law is fully implemented, we encourage VA, and this congress, to provide the full resources necessary, as the Department historically lacked the appropriate support and resulted in unacceptable late payments.<sup>6</sup>

Through increased access to and participation in these benefits, budget obligations should naturally continue to increase. We encourage the subcommittee 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 we noted during the Joint Veterans Committee annual hearing on policy priorities for 2019, student veterans have led the way for all non-traditional students in higher education, and this unique population is succeeding at remarkable rates.<sup>7</sup> In many ways, the original GI Bill democratized higher education to all Americans. Prior to 1944, the most Americans interested in pursuing higher education faced unrealistic prospects; 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 education.<sup>8</sup> 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

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Budget. *FY 2020 Budget Submission*. Available: <https://www.va.gov/budget/products.asp>

<sup>6</sup> Stewart, Emily. Vox. The VA's latest issues paying student veterans their benefits, explained. Dec. 11, 2018. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/12/7/18129508/forever-gi-bill-student-veterans-housing-wilkie>

<sup>7</sup> Jared Lyon, *Student Veterans of America Legislative Priorities of 2019*, March 7, 2019, <https://www.veterans.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/5%20-%20SVA%20Testimony%2003.07.19.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*



education needed to meet a veteran's employment goals.<sup>9</sup> 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 years.<sup>10</sup>

SVA tracks student veterans concerns and feedback associated with the VR&E program to better understand how the program could be strengthened. Themes within this feedback collected included: the large caseloads Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (VRC) must manage, the inconsistent VRC decisions, and frequent turnover of VRCs.<sup>11</sup> We believe it is necessary to meet the current appropriations demand that VA outlined; however, congress could also address some of the underlying resource issues that are contributing to those concerns and proactively improve the VR&E program.<sup>12</sup>

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 veterans.<sup>13</sup> It is unclear if those ratios are being met currently, and we encourage this subcommittee to hold VA accountable to that ratio in their budget request, though we appreciate VA's focus on achieving this target over the past fiscal year. Also, we continue to urge this committee to encourage VA to increase the capped pay of VRCs to match higher salary caps of similar Department of Education (ED) positions to aid in the turnover of VRCs.<sup>14, 15</sup>

### **Forever GI Bill Implementation in VA's Budget Request**

In 2017, 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 16th that year, the Forever GI Bill, officially titled the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Education Assistance Act, made history thanks to this committee and the current congress.<sup>16, 17</sup>

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. Nearly all of 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 concerned about the success of the law's ongoing implementation, which must include sufficient appropriations

<sup>9</sup> 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](https://www.benefits.va.gov/vocrehab/eligibility_and_entitlement.asp).

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Budget. *FY 2020 Budget Submission*. Available: <https://www.va.gov/budget/products.asp>

<sup>11</sup> 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-114hrg98685/pdf/CHRG-114hrg98685.pdf> (turnover discussion on pg. 18).

<sup>12</sup> 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>.

<sup>13</sup> 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>.

<sup>14</sup> 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](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).

<sup>15</sup> See generally National Association of Veterans' Program Administrators, *2017 NAVPA Legislative Agenda*, <http://www.navpa.org/2017-navpa-legislative-agenda/>.

<sup>16</sup> 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>

<sup>17</sup> 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/>



and continued vigilance to the implementation process.<sup>18</sup> The fall 2019 semester will be a crucial indicator of this process, as many of the technically complex provisions should have taken effect by this date.

In several oversight hearings this committee held last 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.<sup>19</sup> 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 begging for change because I haven't received what I was promised."<sup>20</sup>

SVA commends VA and its staff for public outreach efforts to spread awareness, and we commend the obvious dedication to successfully implementing the Forever GI Bill; we remind all stakeholders that students, administrators, and advocates all have a vested interest in transparent and timely communication. Most recently, school administrators have communicated a lack of information from VA on how these changes will affect the schools, and we encourage congress to work with VA on addressing this crucial gap.

As detailed in VA's budget request, the Department needs sufficient resources appropriated to meet that goal.<sup>21</sup> 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 face.

### **Improving the GI Bill Comparison Tool**

In VA's budget justification, the Department cites the GI Bill Comparison tool as an important resource for prospective and current student veterans.<sup>22</sup> Since inception in 2014, the GI Bill Comparison Tool has proved to be an invaluable source of information for veterans trying to understand the value of their GI Bill as they considered different education options. There are, however, important improvements that would make the process of considering education options significantly better. Additional IT budget resources should be devoted to implementing important congressional mandates, and the GI Bill Comparison Tool is no exception.

As it stands, there is a lack of coordination between ED and VA with the College Navigator, College Scorecard, and GI Comparison Tool, reducing the overall delivery of powerful data to veterans.<sup>23, 24, 25</sup> The Comparison Tool has unique and important data, necessitating a separate tool from ED's current options; no less, the underlying data is not being effectively shared to deliver prospective students a complete view of their options.

The current data running the Comparison Tool is largely limited to VA's internally available data, which is severely limited, notably excluding many student veterans who run out of benefits or elect alternative funding sources. Student veterans should be able to rate their schools, thereby affording future student veterans direct consumer feedback similar to Amazon's verified user rating system.

<sup>18</sup> 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>.

<sup>19</sup> 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>

<sup>20</sup> 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>

<sup>21</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Budget. *FY 2020 Budget Submission*. Available: <https://www.va.gov/budget/products.asp>

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

<sup>23</sup> College Navigator, National Center for Education Statistics, US Department of Education, <https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>, Accessed 01 March 2019

<sup>24</sup> College Scorecard, US Department of Education, <https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/>, Accessed 01 March 2019

<sup>25</sup> GI Bill Comparison Tool, US Department of Veterans Affairs, <https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/>, Accessed 01 March 2019



In 2013, Public Law 112-249 mandated the statutory requirement for VA to launch, “centralized mechanism for tracking and publishing feedback from students,” similar to ‘Amazon reviews,’ yet this functionality is still missing.<sup>26</sup> SVA appreciates the continued availability to the raw data powering the GI Bill Comparison Tool, which affords external entities to run complementary research and analysis to support additional feedback to VA and policymakers.

Finally, we encourage VA to develop a mechanism to maintain closed schools within the tool, versus having them merely disappear. This disappearance of schools from the tool also applies to associated data, leaving significant gaps in the overall picture.

### **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 this subcommittee. Our concerns with VA’s budget request have a common dominator: at present, VA is lacking dedicated Under Secretary-level leadership on behalf of economic opportunity programs. To be clear, 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. In other words, the VA bureaucracy is not currently designed to properly support programs of future-focused empowerment.

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, in 2017 SVA released the *National Veteran Education Success Tracker* (NVEST) in partnership with VA, which focuses on outcomes of student veterans and demonstrates the return on investment of student veterans.<sup>27</sup> 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.

NVEST 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.<sup>28</sup> Based on this research, we support aligning economic opportunity-focused programs into a distinct lane within VA known as the Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration. Presently, economic opportunity programs such as the GI Bill, home loan guaranty, and many other empowering programs for veterans are buried within the bureaucracy of VBA and functionally in competition against disability compensation policy for internal resources.

On their public data site, VA proudly and rightly pronounces, “Economic competitiveness isn’t just about employment; it encompasses overall employment, wealth, independent living, housing, career mobility and educational attainment. VA is proud to work alongside employment experts at the Department of Labor and policy leaders in DoD to ensure we are in alignment with relevant trends and services they offer to transitioning service members and veterans.”<sup>29</sup> With economic opportunity as a stated priority of VA, we strongly support the establishment of an Under Secretary of Economic Opportunity at VA, who would report directly to the Secretary.

<sup>26</sup> Public Law 112-249, “Comprehensive Veterans Education Information Policy”, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-112publ249/pdf/PLAW-112publ249.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> 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.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

<sup>29</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs, “*Understanding Economic Competitiveness in Relation to Their Non-Veteran Counterparts.*” Accessed March 16, 2018. <https://www.data.va.gov/story/economic-opportunities-veterans>.



These programs are buried within the bureaucracy of VA and lack a true champion at the level of leadership these programs warrant, as demonstrated this past year in VA's failure to successfully implement the congressional mandates of the Forever GI Bill a timely and transparent manner. SVA appreciates the recent creation of the Office of Transition and Economic Development (TED) within VBA, yet this step further demonstrates VA's lack of commitment to providing economic opportunity programs an Under Secretary-level leader to administer these programs for veterans.

Over the past century, VA evolved to focus on compensating veterans for loss, which worked for previous generations of veterans, but fails to address the future needs of veterans, nor those of our nation. The reality of the 21st century and beyond demands the additional goal of empowering veterans to excel post-service. Critically, this will further advance our nation's goals of enhancing economic competitiveness; a focus on veteran contributions to business and industry, to governments, to non-profit organizations, and to communities, and preparation through the best education programs in our country will result in imperative returns on the taxpayer's investments.

To truly achieve "whole health" for veterans in the future economy, it is essential we afford VA the opportunity to enrich the lives of veterans through the primacy of VA's economic opportunity programs, which may also play an important role as a gateway to VA through exceptional interactions and services in programs important to the future of veterans post-service. During several House Committee on Veterans' Affairs hearings in the last Congress, we've articulated our commitment to elevating the economic opportunity programs at VA and identified the need to address a lack of resource-focus on economic opportunity programs within the greater scope of the overall VA budget.<sup>30, 31, 32</sup>

This proposal would flatten and streamline some of the bureaucracy of VA. With proper safeguards in place, it would curb any expansion of government while providing economic opportunity and transition programs an accountable champion, resulting in abundant improvements to support veterans:

- **Increases Accountability.** This proposal would provide for greater accountability and access to issues that empower veterans. It further prevents these issues from being reduced in priority with shifting VBA leadership. At present, the VBA leadership team has shown a commitment to economic opportunity programs, but that support is tied to existing leadership. The creation of an Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration would cement the importance of such programs with guaranteed leadership and accountability.
- **Elevates Economic Opportunity Issues.** Directly relevant to President Trump's Executive Order 13822, "Supporting Our Veterans during Their Transition from Uniformed Services to Civilian Life", this proposal supports the importance of transition, education, employment, and well-being<sup>33</sup>. Further, it sends a strong message to veterans and the American public that economic opportunity issues truly matter and are

<sup>30</sup> Hubbard, William. Testimony for Legislative Hearing on the Topic of "Legislative Hearing on H.R. 1206, H.R. 3023, H.R. 3940, H.R. 4451, H.R. 4830, H.R. 4835, H.R. 5044, and a draft bill entitled, 'VA Home Loan Improvement Act of 2018'." March 20, 2018, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR10/20180320/108011/HHRG-115-VR10-Wstate-HubbardW-20180320.pdf>.

<sup>31</sup> Augustine, Lauren. Testimony for Legislative Hearing on the Topic of "U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Fiscal Year 2019 Budget: Veterans Benefits Administration and the Board of Veterans' Appeals." March 15, 2018, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittees on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, Economic Opportunity, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR09/20180315/106968/HHRG-115-VR09-Wstate-AugustineL-20180315.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> Vangellow, Cassandra. Testimony for Oversight Hearing on the Topic of "A Review of VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program." May 17, 2018, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, <https://veterans.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=2160>.

<sup>33</sup> Executive Order 13822. *Supporting Our Veterans During Their Transition From Uniformed Service to Civilian Life*. January 9, 2018. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2018/01/12/2018-00630/supporting-our-veterans-during-their-transition-from-uniformed-service-to-civilian-life>



important enough to have the leadership of an Under Secretary. Giving a national voice to issues like home ownership, education, training, and employment is a critically important measure. Further, it provides a champion to engage with the Department of Education (DoEd) in advancing higher education interests for veterans.

- **Reduces Bureaucracy.** Bureaucracy at VA has historically led to serious national challenges, and keeping economic opportunity issues buried at the bottom of VBA is not the answer. This proposal flattens the bureaucracy of VA in favor of the veteran, versus creating additional layers in the current structure or overloading the structure. This was painfully apparent during the initially botched implementation of certain provisions of the Forever GI Bill, as a lack of leadership within VBA resulted in technical failures and a dearth of accountability.
- **Establishes Direct Counterpart.** The Department of Labor (DoL) and the Department of Defense (DoD) presently lack a direct and dedicated counterpart within VA's Under Secretary leadership for the programs that overlap the agencies—any significant initiative must achieve multiple layers of approval before reaching the customers: our country's veterans. This proposal provides DoD and DoL with a political appointee who can move important programs into the modern age, while supporting their missions more broadly for positive, holistic interagency solutions.
- **Supports "Whole Health."** A tragically elastic narrative exists around veterans as either "broken or damaged." In reality, veterans are fundamentally the same as all other Americans—hard-working, community-oriented neighbors who want what's best for their families, and who thrive in higher education and career when they have opportunity to access economic opportunity programs. Creation of an Under Secretary of Economic Opportunity will empower veterans to be successful as they transition through improved education programs and better employment opportunities. One of the major challenges facing veterans today is "transition stress," an issue an Under Secretary of Economic Opportunity would be keen to address via a robust portfolio of programs and services veterans can rely on during transition to advance their, and our country's, economic interests.<sup>34</sup> With better service and stronger outcomes, more veterans will be apt to actually "Choose VA."

We unabashedly recognize that bold initiatives are required to ensure our country delivers the best outcomes possible for veterans, yet some apparently continue to prefer to the status quo of heavily layered bureaucracy. Some have cited concerns regarding "increased resource costs and creation of redundant roles." Uniquely, this proposal achieves the exact opposite outcome as it will streamline these programs given a dedicated leader. Others have argued for continuing to give current leaders at VA the chance to address and elevate these issues through their own work. For decades VA has had the opportunity to elevate economic opportunity issues.

The approach of "wait and see" is really not an approach at all, but instead a waiting game meant to guard the current system which continues to miss the mark on providing veterans the level of service they deserve for the benefits they earned. Waiting for the bureaucracy to change itself is ultimately misguided and unacceptably short-sighted, as personality-dependent success is not a long-term solution to these structural challenges.

Veterans' organizations came out in force to support this overall concept when it was previously introduced in congress, including: The Disabled American Veterans (DAV), The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA), and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA).<sup>35</sup> Today, the current proposal further simplifies the proposal of a Veteran Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration with no intention

<sup>34</sup> Clark, James. *For Most Vets, PTSD Isn't the Problem, 'Transition Stress' Is. Here's What It Means*, January 25, 2018, <http://taskandpurpose.com/what-is-transition-stress/>

<sup>35</sup> United States. Cong. House. Committee on Veterans Affairs. *Legislative Hearing on H.R. 356; H.R. 832; H.R. 1994; H.R. 2133; H.R. 2275; H.R. 2344; H.R. 2360; H.R. 2361; and a draft bill. Hearings, June 2, 2007.* 114th Cong. 1st sess.



of statutorily affecting the DoL VETS program, a valued partner for transition and employment programs like VR&E. The Independent Budget, an authoritative annual presentation of recommended funding levels produced by American Veterans (AMVETS), DAV, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA), and VFW has called for this change for years.<sup>36</sup>

Last year, the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) published a compelling argument for restructuring VA in a piece titled, “Economic Opportunity, Transition Assistance, and the 21st-Century Veteran: The Case for a Fourth VA Administration.”<sup>37</sup> AEI’s research concluded legislative language related to veterans creates a powerful and sustained narrative related to this population; notably, language consistent with a “deficit model;” words such as ‘broken’, ‘wounded’, ‘helpless’, etc., damage overall perceptions of this population wreaking further havoc on a wider audience of veterans.

Conversely, language consistent with an “asset model,” such as ‘civic asset,’ ‘successful,’ ‘leaders,’ etc., has the effect of improving the likelihood of achieving positive transition and long-range experiences. This proposal is strongly in favor of a positive narrative of veterans, as it proposes elevating issue areas the public widely views as empowering such as education, employment, home ownership, and others.

We encourage this committee to consider investing significant data authorities in this office to be able to effectively track, and one day project, the true impact empowered veterans have on the country’s economic health. For example, it’s known that the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, known as the original GI Bill, had an economic output of \$7 for every \$1 dollar invested in that program.<sup>38</sup> Insights such as these will be vital to establishing the long-term understanding of these programs. Further, we recommend this office produce a consolidated annual report reviewing program efficacy, tracking key metrics tied to outcomes instead of outputs.

VA publicly declares they, “[have] a mission to help veterans maximize their economic competitiveness and thus, increase the number of economic opportunities for veterans and their families.”<sup>39</sup> This proposal will maximize the notion VA publicly espouses in empowering veterans to lead successful lives. Further demonstrating this idea, the 1996 Congressional Commission on Servicemembers and Veterans Transition Assistance once stated, “If employment is the door to a successful transition to civilian life, education will be the key to employment in the information age.”<sup>40</sup> Future generations of veterans are counting on the success of this proposal, and we are eager to work with this Congress and the White House to make it a reality.

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In addition to the proposed points for consideration outlined above, SVA supports VA’s interest in amending 38 U.S.C. § 3699 to extend the restoration of entitlement to educational assistance for Veterans affected by school closure or disapproval, implemented by Section 109 of the Forever GI Bill, to apply to VR&E programs provided under Chapter 31.<sup>41, 42</sup> Any veteran affected by sudden school closures should have their benefits restored to afford them the opportunity for continued success.

<sup>36</sup> The Independent Budget for the Department of Veterans Affairs Budget (FY2012), 112th Congress, [http://www.independentbudget.org/2012/IB\\_FY2012.pdf](http://www.independentbudget.org/2012/IB_FY2012.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> Burgess, Rebecca. American Enterprise Institute (2018). “*Economic Opportunity, Transition Assistance, and the 21st-Century Veteran: The Case for a Fourth VA Administration*,” <http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Economic-Opportunity-Transition-Assistance-and-the-21st-Century-Veteran.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> 100th United States Congress, Joint Economic Committee, Subcommittee on Education and Health of the Joint Economic Committee. “*A Cost-Benefit Analysis of Government Investment in Post-Secondary Education Under the World War II GI Bill*,” December 14, 1988.

<sup>39</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs, *Understanding Economic Competitiveness in Relation to Their Non-Veteran Counterparts*. Accessed March 16, 2018. <https://www.data.va.gov/story/economic-opportunities-veterans>.

<sup>40</sup> <https://ntrl.ntis.gov/NTRL/dashboard/searchResults/titleDetail/PB2006113212.xhtml>

<sup>41</sup> 38 U.S. Code § 3699. Effects of closure or disapproval of educational institution, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/38/3699>

<sup>42</sup> Public Law 115–48, Section 109, <https://www.congress.gov/115/plaws/publ48/PLAW-115publ48.pdf>



We thank the Chairman, Ranking Member, and the Subcommittee 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 subcommittee, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, and the entire Congress to ensure the success of all generations of veterans through education.



**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 2019, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.



## **William Hubbard, Chief of Staff**

William Hubbard joined the professional staff of Student Veterans of America in February 2014. Mr. Hubbard has been frequently called to testify to Congress on a variety of topics related to higher education and veterans. He also regularly advises the White House and senior executives of the Administration on the interests of student veterans and higher education policy.

Mr. Hubbard received his Bachelors in International Studies from American University. After graduating, he spent several years serving government agencies to include the Department of the Navy, Department of State, and the State of Indiana Department of Revenue in his role as a Federal Strategy and Operations Consultant at Deloitte Consulting.

As a National Executive Committee Member of Deloitte's Armed Forces Business Resource Group, Mr. Hubbard was dedicated to the achievement of veterans, and led the successful proposal of two veteran-focused pro bono projects. Prior to his career in consulting, he co-founded a successful startup business in the snack food industry.

Most recently, Mr. Hubbard deployed to Kabul City, Afghanistan and served with the Special Operations Joint Task Force as a member of a small cell of intelligence professionals. Previously, Mr. Hubbard served in Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) to conduct force protection activities including threat assessments, review of the human terrain, and liaison with joint operations units as well as executive-level embassy personnel.

Mr. Hubbard joined the Marine Corps Reserve in 2006 and initially served with 2nd Battalion, 24th Marines. Today, he continues to serve at in an intelligence team Quantico, VA. He has served SVA at both the chapter and national levels, and has been passionate about veterans' issues since entering the armed services.