



**TESTIMONY OF**

**STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA**

**BEFORE THE**

**COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

**U.S. SENATE**

**HEARING ON THE TOPIC OF:**

**PENDING LEGISLATION**

**April 26, 2023**

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Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, and Members of the Committee: Thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit testimony on the legislation pending before you today.

With a mission focused on empowering student veterans, SVA is committed to providing an educational experience that goes beyond the classroom. Through a dedicated and expansive network of on-campus chapters across the country, SVA aims to inspire yesterday's warriors by connecting student veterans with a community of dedicated chapter leaders. Every day these passionate leaders work to provide the necessary resources, network support, and advocacy to ensure student veterans can effectively connect, expand their skills, and ultimately achieve their greatest potential.

SVA thanks the Committee for considering several pieces of legislation that would impact student veterans and other military-affiliated students in higher education.

**S. 291, A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to establish in the Department the Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration, and for other purposes**

SVA supports this legislation which would create a new Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration within VA.

For years, SVA and others have called for creating a fourth administration at VA—a Veteran Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration. This new administration would provide VA's economic opportunity programs with the dedicated, senior-level leadership they deserve. As DAV, PVA, and VFW pointed out in the 2019 Independent Budget, a "new undersecretary for EO would refocus resources, provide a champion for these programs, and create a central point of contact for veterans service organizations and Congress."<sup>1</sup>

As we've noted in the past, a greater focus must be placed on economic opportunity for veterans, including through higher education. VA can best achieve this by building on the success of a new office dedicated to transition and economic opportunity and elevating it, and Education Service, to its own 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 the Veterans Benefits Administration and functionally in competition against disability compensation for internal resources.

Over the past century, VA has focused on compensating veterans for loss, but the reality of the 21st century and beyond also demands that we empower veterans to excel financially post-service. Financial stability is a key social determinant of health that compliments other VA goals like caring for veterans' "Whole Health" and combatting veteran suicide. A Veteran Economic Opportunity Administration would bolster these shared goals while also resulting in impressive returns on the taxpayers' investments.

We thank Senator Rubio for his consistent leadership on this issue, and we ask that the Committee prioritize this legislation appropriately.

**S. 498, Veteran Education Empowerment Act**

SVA supports this bill which would reauthorize a Department of Education grant program designed to coordinate resources and services for student veterans through veteran centers. The bill would also make improvements to the program.

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<sup>1</sup> DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS ET AL., THE INDEPENDENT BUDGET: VETERANS AGENDA FOR THE 116<sup>TH</sup> CONGRESS 120-22 (2019), *available at* [https://www.independentbudget.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/IndependentBudget\\_2019.pdf](https://www.independentbudget.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/IndependentBudget_2019.pdf)Past years SVA testimonies and IB.

On-campus student veteran centers are crucial to student veteran success. According to the results of a survey on student veteran progress toward degree attainment conducted by Operation College Promise, “the most beneficial campus service was a veteran center on campus, especially one with a specific office/lounge where veteran students can meet, work together, and learn about veteran/military student benefits and programs.”<sup>2</sup> Another study found that Post-9/11 veterans were 94 percent more likely to graduate if they used a veterans’ center.<sup>3</sup> This closely parallels what SVA hears directly from student veterans.

The reauthorization of funding and improvements made by this bill is critical and comes at a time when veteran-support services face reduced funding on many campuses.<sup>4</sup> The funded programming through this bill would demonstrably benefit student veterans. For example, the legislation would support single dedicated points of contact for veterans and veteran-specific orientations, which has shown to increase student veteran success outcomes by nearly 15 percent and 10 percent, respectively.<sup>5</sup> These are just a few of the important support mechanisms this bill would make possible at campuses across the country through well-equipped student veteran centers.

SVA is also excited about the bill’s requirement that the Department of Education develop and maintain a website highlighting best practices for how higher education institutions can support student veterans. We are hopeful this website could serve as a roadmap to guide more institutions in establishing and improving important infrastructure, services, and resources for these students. Notably, the benefits of the website would extend well beyond the institutions awarded grants through this program by equipping any interested institution with the knowledge it needs to better serve their student veterans.

We thank Senator Rosen for her leadership on this bill and look forward to working with this Committee to advance this crucial legislation.

## **S. 656, Veteran Improvement Commercial Driver License Act of 2023**

SVA supports this legislation which would increase veteran access to Commercial Driver License (CDL) programs.

With the right training, veterans are ideal candidates for high-demand vocations, including trucking. The Veteran Improvement Commercial Driver License Act expands access to CDL programs by authorizing institutions that already provide these programs to create new campuses that can immediately have their trucking programs approved for VA education benefits instead of waiting the standard two years. The bill includes intentional safeguards to ensure these new programs offer veterans quality training by requiring the programs be licensed, use the same curriculum as an existing, approved location, require reporting to prove the curriculum requirement and giving VA the option to deny the exemption.

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<sup>2</sup> WENDY A. LANG ET AL., COMPLETING THE MISSION II: A STUDY OF VETERAN STUDENTS’ PROGRESS TOWARD DEGREE ATTAINMENT IN THE POST 9/11 ERA 10 (Nov. 2013), *available at* [https://campussuite-storage.s3.amazonaws.com/prod/1280306/3a32f069-629b-11e7-99ef-124f7febbf4a/1691064/278b511c-024e-11e8-8b36-0a8d44716112/file/completing\\_mission\\_ii-Nov2013.pdf](https://campussuite-storage.s3.amazonaws.com/prod/1280306/3a32f069-629b-11e7-99ef-124f7febbf4a/1691064/278b511c-024e-11e8-8b36-0a8d44716112/file/completing_mission_ii-Nov2013.pdf) (emphasis added).

<sup>3</sup> Nicole R. Morgan et. al, Post-9/11 Veterans’ Pursuit and Completion of Post-secondary Education: Social Connection, Mental Health, and Finances 0(0) 1-16 *Journal of Education* 11 (2023), *available at* <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/00220574231168638>.

<sup>4</sup> Military Times Staff, *About 1 in 3 colleges have cut funding for veteran-support programs, survey says*, MILITARYTIMES (Feb. 22, 2021), <https://www.militarytimes.com/education-transition/2021/02/23/about-1-in-3-colleges-have-cut-funding-for-veteran-support-programs-survey-says/>.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Abra Kathleen Kinch, *The Strategy of Being “Military Friendly” a Comprehensive Look at the Strategies Employed Under the Banner of Military and Veteran Friendliness* 39 (2019) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University) (on file with author).

SVA respectfully asks that the Committee advance this bill.

**S. 1090, A bill to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to update the payment system of the Department to allow for electronic fund transfer of educational assistance to a foreign institution of higher education**

SVA strongly supports this legislation which would mandate that VA update their IT systems to allow VA education benefit funds to be paid to institutions without an Employer Identification Number (EIN) or U.S. bank account.

SVA has heard from numerous veterans and their family members encountering major obstacles using VA education benefits overseas. One of the many issues they face is their institution being barred from approval for VA education benefits because it does not have an EIN or U.S. bank account number. VA recently indicated that the EIN is no longer required, but the U.S. bank account requires one due to IT limitations. We believe VA is already contemplating a fix for the issue, but the Department's failure to act thus far continues to limit beneficiary choice overseas.

There are a myriad of other issues that chill beneficiaries' ability to use their VA education benefits overseas. According to first-hand accounts conveyed to SVA by foreign institutions, if an institution does choose to apply for program approval and submits a complete application, they could wait up to a year and a half for the program to be approved. The result is that many institutions—from Europe to Oceania—are planning to stop accepting VA education benefits. SVA invites the Committee to work with us on these issues to restore student veterans' educational options overseas.

SVA thanks Senator Menendez for his leadership on this issue, and we strongly urge the Committee to advance this bill swiftly.

**Student Veterans Transparency and Protection Act**

SVA supports this bill, which would substantially improve the overall quantity and quality of the information provided by the GI Bill Comparison Tool. The bill would also expand opportunities for education benefit restoration when bad-actor schools negatively impact students.

SVA has long supported improving the quality of information available to student veterans so they can make better-informed decisions regarding their education. Student veterans deserve access to high-quality information when choosing their schools. This decision has far-reaching consequences for students. It determines the overall quality of their education, the amount of federal funding they can access to finance their studies, and the likelihood of them obtaining their desired degree or credential in a timely manner.

This legislation fills critical information gaps in the current GI Bill Comparison Tool. For instance, the bill would require that the Tool include student outcome data, additional information on the amount of financial aid available to students at each institution, and flag legal actions taken against schools. The bill would also increase transparency by requiring VA to keep all information for at least seven years and make it publicly accessible. Further, the bill would ensure relevant VA personnel have the knowledge and training to properly support all service members, student veterans, their families, and survivors using the GI Bill Comparison Tool. Lastly, the legislation would authorize much-needed relief that allows VA to restore students' education benefits if they were impacted by institutional misconduct resulting in adverse actions against the institution by state or federal regulators or the VA.

This bill's commonsense reforms would provide student veterans with more information to make better decisions

about their higher education journeys and expand their access to critical relief when impacted by bad-actor schools. We encourage the Committee to advance this legislation.

## **Additional Legislation**

SVA also supports the following bills:

- S. 350, the Fry Scholarship Enhancement Act of 2023
- The Love Lives on Act of 2023

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The continued success of veterans in higher education in the Post-9/11 era is no mistake or coincidence. In our Nation's history, educated veterans have always been the best of a generation and the key to solving our most complex challenges. Today's student veterans carry this legacy forward.

We thank the Chairman, Ranking Member, 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.