



VETERANS EDUCATION SUCCESS

ORAL TESTIMONY

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EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF VA
VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AND EMPLOYMENT
PROGRAMS

BEFORE THE

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

June 4, 2019

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. At Veterans Education Success, we work to advance higher education success for military-affiliated students. We believe holistic support and access to high quality post-secondary education and training for workforce development increases vocational opportunities for those who have served our country.

VR&E is a crucial program that does just this as it provides support for veterans and servicemembers with service-connected disabilities through individualized plans that help them “prepare for, obtain, and maintain suitable employment.”¹

I would like to bring to the Committee’s attention the following three areas that deserve attention: (1) Technology, (2) Ways to Improve the role of Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors, and (3) the need for parity.

First – Technology

The last time the case management system for VR&E was updated was in 1997. Complaints from school administrators around the country have revolved around the challenges certifying officials have faced with, what one administrator referred to as, the black hole of certification.

¹ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Longitudinal Study (PL 110-389 Sec. 334): Annual Report 2018 for FY 2017.
<https://www.benefits.va.gov/VOCREHAB/docs/2017LongStdy.pdf>

Student veterans have gone up to 6 months without receiving payments causing undo financial hardship. When SCOs contact regional offices for updates they are left with little information and much frustration as they work to find ways to provide answers and support for their student veterans struggling to stay in school.

VBA has proactively made this issue a priority over the last year and based on recent conversations we have had with the VR&E office, we remain cautiously optimistic. With recent challenges VA OI & T has experienced with its last attempt to modernize the current system and the recent rollout of sections of the Harry W. Colmery Act, we urge careful Congressional oversight.

Second - Veteran Resource Counselors

Client-to-Counselor Ratio – We applaud VBA’s concerted effort to reduce the number of clients per counselor but question the current legislative mandate of 125 clients to one counselor. The program offers individualized plans specific to the needs and challenges of each client. This type of support is necessary, yet the time it takes to provide such support and follow-up can be labor intensive.² We encourage the Committee and VA to further explore whether the current client to counselor ratio is realistic and consider decreasing the congressionally mandated ratio to something closer to 85 to one.

² The American Council on Education. ACE’s 2015 Servicemember and Veteran Academic Advising Summit Report. 2015. <https://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Documents/2015-Veterans-Programs-Summit-Report.pdf>

Conflicts of Interest – We are also concerned about the recent news of James King, a VR&E Counselor who pleaded guilty to bribery, fraud and obstruction for demanding and receiving bribes from three for-profit schools in exchange for steering veterans to those schools.³

While this example is clearly more egregious in nature, it is important to ensure counselors are not in positions where significant conflicts of interest exist. It also highlights the power and influence counselors have in VR&E.

Consistency of Service Provided by Counselors –I have supported a number of students who were admitted into top tier universities as well as low-quality schools that did not produce the same vocational outcomes. Because the lower-quality school accepted one credit of Physical Education from the student’s Joint Services Transcript, the counselor only approved the individual to choose the lower quality school because it would be more cost effective.

Not all colleges are created equal. A veteran’s career and earnings trajectory are significantly enhanced by attending a college that offers higher quality and better respect on the job market.

Consistency in guidelines and expectations for counselors is important, as is continued training and allowing veterans a more prominent voice in the institution or program of study they

³ The U.S. Department of Justice. Department of Veterans Affairs Official Pleads Guilty to Bribery, Fraud, and Obstruction in \$2 Million Scheme Involving Program for Disabled Military Veterans. October 26, 2018. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/departments-veterans-affairs-official-pleads-guilty-bribery-fraud-and-obstruction-2-million>

choose to pursue. We encourage the Committee to institute higher benchmarks counselors should consider for a program's quality, including considering college outcome metrics, using readily-available federal data.

Jack of All Trades, Master of None – In a Government Accountability Office report, veterans cited challenges with their counselor's inability to help them translate their military service into federal civilian employment and frustration that a counselor did not adequately describe the physical challenges of the job given the veteran's disabilities.⁴ Veterans using the VR&E program are supported by their Counselors to develop individualized plans following one of five tracks. The counselor is expected to be a subject matter expert on each of these issues. This seems unattainable for any one person.

VES agrees with GAO's recommendation to conduct field research to identify and publish promising practices for field offices.

Third - Parity in Programs

With the passage of the Forever GI Bill, Congress removed the 15-year delimiting date and included restoration of entitlement to students due to school closures. We agree with our colleagues who have called for the removal of the 12-year delimiting date.⁵

⁴ U.S. Government Accountability Office. Report to Congressional Committees, "VA Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment: Further Performance and Workload Management improvements Are Needed." 2014.
<https://www.gao.gov/assets/670/660160.pdf>

⁵ The Independent Budget Veterans Agenda for the 116th Congress: Policy Recommendations for Congress and the Administration. "Enhance Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Services."

We also believe those using VR&E should have the same restoration of entitlement as their peers using the Post-9/11 GI Bill should a school they are attending close.

We also ask the Committee to consider moving the program to only one subsistence rate instead of the two that currently exist. Moving to one rate reduces bureaucracy, eliminates confusion, and creates better parity for those using the program.

Transparency – Finally, we believe the program needs more transparency and that the GI Bill Comparison Tool might be an optimal place to house information for both programs.

I appreciate the Committee's continued commitment to this program and look forward to answering any further questions you might have.