

Examining the Effectiveness of the Veterans Readiness and Employment (VR&E) Program

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Statement of

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With Respect To

**“Examining the Effectiveness of the Veterans Readiness and Employment
(VR&E) Program”**

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Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and members of the subcommittee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and its Auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to provide our remarks on this important topic.

First established in 1918, and formerly known as Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) program prepares veterans with service-connected disabilities for long-term employment. These disabilities can create certain barriers to employment and VR&E support is aimed at preparing veterans for meaningful careers in industries where they can thrive. Veterans have described VR&E as a life-changing opportunity that put them on a path for success. However, many informed the VFW that they did not receive sufficient guidance to navigate this process.

VFW members who are current student veterans using or who recently used VR&E, School Certifying Officials (SCOs), and other university staff have provided feedback on the successes of the program and highlighted issues they believe cause unnecessary frustration and stress for an already vulnerable group of veterans. These issues include a lack of information to veterans at all stages of the process, insufficiently staffed counseling and administrative support, and obstacles to receiving funding in a timely and consistent manner. With more veterans using VR&E than ever before, these issues must be addressed to ensure participants successfully reach their employment goals.

Usage and Outcomes

VA reporting from May 2024 states that it provides VR&E benefits to approximately 125,000 veterans annually. Each year, some participants are new to the program, some are continuing, and others are reentering after previously discontinuing. The benefit is meant to provide job training, education, counseling, and/or employment assistance to veterans

while covering the cost of their education or training programs, supplies, and housing needs. Most—88 percent—of VR&E users become part of the Employment Through Long-Term Services Track that provides education or training for professional or vocational fields, apprenticeships, or on-the-job training. The other four available tracks, which provide additional employment services and benefits to support independent living, comprise the other 12 percent of veterans using VR&E.

The data reveals that the program results in positive employment outcomes. The July 2024 *Veterans Benefit Administration Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) Longitudinal Study* found that just over a third of the participants involved in the twenty-year study had fully achieved their program goals. Categorized as “rehabilitated,” this group has a 73 percent employment rate, 78 percent rate of jobs that match or somewhat match their VR&E training plan, a median annual individual income of \$81,000, and a 96 percent satisfaction rate with the VR&E program.

Furthermore, the study found that while more than half the participants had discontinued VR&E, one of the top reasons for leaving was they had found employment. Some veterans stopped their programs for health or family reasons, but the VA report indicated that 48 percent of the discontinued participants were employed in a job that matches or somewhat matches their VR&E training plan, and 60 percent later reentered the program. While the VR&E program has proven to be very beneficial to those who successfully complete their goals, the VFW has concerns that many veterans who need this help are not receiving the information, counseling, and funding to make it through the program.

Lack of Information

Feedback the VFW has received from veterans indicates that most hear about VR&E through word-of-mouth from other veterans who used the program. Some said they were told about the benefit while still in the military during their Transition Assistance Program (TAP) class that covered VA resources. One veteran who attended TAP last year explained that VR&E was very briefly mentioned and there was no emphasis on how beneficial the program could be for those who need it. He explained that so little information was provided during TAP that it seemed like VR&E was “a big secret.”

Veterans consistently tell the VFW that there is a lack of information during all stages of the VR&E process, from learning that it exists to begin with, through the application process, and even after being approved for the program. For several years, we have received complaints from veterans who find that approval for VR&E benefits comes down to the initial and often very short (sometimes only 15 minutes long) meeting with a program counselor. Veterans do not have the information on what this meeting will involve, how they should prepare, what information they should provide, and how they should communicate their needs and goals. Approval depends so heavily on who the initial counselor is that veterans find the process overly subjective and lacking in clarity on what the true requirements entail. Those who are not prepared for those initial meetings risk not being approved for the benefit when they may desperately need it.

Once in the program, the lack of information continues. Students are not provided with clear guidance about what supplies can be covered and how they can be purchased. One SCO from a college in Colorado said she often found that students needed equipment like laptops, but did not know that they could be covered, and struggled to find a way to pay for them out of pocket. She explained that to obtain books and supplies, the student must request the VR&E counselor to submit a purchase order, which is done through a third-party vendor system. The purchase order is then sent to the school's military and veteran office where a SCO creates a voucher for the school's bookstore. The bookstore then can provide the student with an account and purchasing instructions. When students are not told by their assigned counselors that they can receive supplies when using VR&E and are not informed of the process, they miss deadlines and do not receive what they need when they need it.

As with the supply process, students also need clearly communicated information and guidance on course selection and how to receive housing funds on time. Receiving approval for these critical parts of the program comes down to having regular communication with a VR&E counselor. Unfortunately, there are issues there too.

Counselor Workload

The VFW is concerned about shortages of VR&E counselors, also known as Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (VRCs), to assist student veterans on college campuses across the country. Even before the recent increases in the number of people using VR&E, veterans

had reported over several years that it was very hard to reach their VRCs or they were too busy to answer their questions. Also, some said they did not have the same VRC during the course of their programs.

One veteran stated, “Over the course of two years, I was assigned to four different VR&E counselors. The VA switched my counselors without any prior warning or explanation. Just as I had begun to build rapport with one, they would be reassigned. This lack of continuity in counseling was disruptive and frustrating.”

A second veteran explained, “My VR&E counselor has been helpful and responsive, but they also carry a client load of 100-200+ veterans at any given time, so there seems to be little room to bounce questions or problem-solve issues that come up. I have no doubt my counselor would answer my emails, but if I want fast, practical, advice-based answers, I rely on my school’s military department.”

One SCO at a college in Colorado said that students may have questions about classes, such as “Can I take certain courses to fulfill a minor?” or “Can I take business classes in addition to my major so that I can start a small business in my area of focus?” Without this administrative guidance, students rely on their VRCs for help and to verify that each class will be covered by VA. The same official remarked that some VRCs did not have the time to verify each course for students, so had the habit of approving the course anyway. For example, she said, “Like a dance class when the student is pursuing a law degree. Does [the counselor] not have time?” An official from a school in the Washington, D.C., area describes having a student there for several years who continuously drops or fails classes, yet his VRC always approves his courses and VA pays for them. This has continued for more than ten years despite the official notifying VA that the student needs real counseling or should no longer be in the program. “Counseling is not happening,” he said, “and many truly need it.” On the other hand, there are cases where veterans have VRCs that will absolutely withhold approving tuition payments if students register for any courses that do not clearly align with their agreed upon plan. Without counseling veterans, approval remains pending until the nonrelevant courses are changed. Veterans simply are not receiving the information they need when they need it.

The VFW has also been informed that at some schools over the last two years, VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) counselors have been assigned VR&E casework in addition to their other

duties. VSOC counselors are hired to provide all student veterans on a college campus with support to navigate the full range of VA benefits, and the resources to successfully complete their education. Not all schools have VSOC staff, but the ones that do serve a large number of veterans and have reported experiencing burnout. Two schools indicated that their VSOC counselors were directed to support VR&E student casework, limiting their ability to engage with the other student veterans on campus they should also be serving.

At the same time, schools report vacancies due to a high rate of turnover with VRCs resulting from low job satisfaction. People with master's degrees in psychology and social work are initially drawn to becoming VRCs to provide veterans with counseling and casework, but then have little time to actually provide that type of support. Instead, much of their time is spent providing administrative assistance for veterans to navigate the strict boundaries of the program. This is not the intended purpose of a VRC. Veterans tell the VFW that they are not receiving counseling. The support is not focused on discussing the veterans' needs, goals, or personal struggles; it is primarily focused on answering administrative questions. If that support were better provided by VA, then VRCs could provide true counseling to students. One school official said that for more than a year, its counselor has been coming in person to campus only two days per week. The counselor uses an office that the school is required to provide to ensure privacy for its students, but there is no time to meet with them because of so many mandatory VA virtual meetings. These issues highlight the need for more oversight in how the program is staffed and administered.

Housing Issues

The issues described with VRCs can also lead to delays in veterans receiving their housing benefits. If students are left waiting for responses to their questions about the course registration or for approvals once they are registered, or if purchase orders are sent late to cover the approved tuition fees, students may not receive their housing payments on time. As previously stated, there is a clear need for additional administrative support within the program to avoid these problems.

According to the VA website, participants in the VR&E program can receive Chapter 31 subsistence allowance. This is a set amount that does not factor in the cost of living in different parts of the country and is too low to cover housing almost anywhere. A veteran who qualifies for the Post-9/11 GI Bill, has at least one day of remaining entitlement, and is

still within the eligibility period, can instead choose to use Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) that tends to have the higher rate of the two benefits. BAH is set at E-5 pay with dependents for the zip code where the institution is located. BAH rates are, therefore, higher in high-cost areas and lower in low-cost areas.

One issue with housing that has been raised by veterans is the impact that transferring GI Bill benefits to dependents has on access to BAH. To illustrate, a current VFW staff member explained that while she was in the military, she transferred all of her GI Bill benefit to her daughters. She completed twenty-three years in the Marine Corps. When she retired, she was accepted into the VR&E program to complete a bachelor's degree that would prepare her for a civilian career as a service-disabled veteran.

Unfortunately, since she did not have even one day of GI Bill benefit remaining, she was not eligible to receive BAH. This would have provided the housing support necessary for her to attend her school in Southern California. Even with her military pension, VA disability, and subsistence allowance, she still had to take out loans to cover the high cost of living near her school and was faced with debt upon completion of the program. GI Bill transferability is used to incentivize service members to stay in the military longer. If they require vocational rehabilitation when they leave or retire but are then faced with a reduced benefit or potential housing instability, what does this say about how their service is regarded? How does that honor their commitment and their sacrifice?

A VFW member and twenty-year Air Force veteran who retired in January 2024 is currently studying with VR&E benefits to become a licensed therapist. Even though he had already received eligibility for the Post-9/11 GI Bill, VA required him to reapply and the process took nearly four months to reestablish his eligibility. The Chapter 31 subsistence allowance while he waited for his BAH to be approved was so low that he and his family experienced significant financial difficulty. In addition, once he started to receive BAH, he was not informed that it would stop during the weeks between semesters. This caused an additional financial strain on his family. One of those three-week breaks is quickly approaching. He said, "It makes budgeting during Christmastime especially stressful. Trying to find a job that will make up for the lost income, while only working for three weeks at a time, is virtually impossible. Given that this program is predicated on the idea that a veteran is unable to work effectively until they complete new job training, cutting off BAH seems to run contrary to the spirit of VR&E. This particular rule for VR&E is especially painful, stress-inducing, and feels like I'm being 'nickel and dimed' by that part of the program."

We must ensure that veterans using VR&E have their housing needs met to allow them to focus on rehabilitation and completing their program goals. VR&E must have more staff support for the administration of the program and to allow VRCs the bandwidth to provide meaningful counseling in casework with their veteran clients. Lastly, VA needs to provide more information and guidance at all stages of the process to better serve these veterans who have sacrificed and deserve this support as they move into a new productive phase of their lives.

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, this concludes my testimony. I welcome any questions that you or members of the subcommittee may have.

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

Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, the VFW has not received any federal grants in Fiscal Year 2024, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.

The VFW has not received payments or contracts from any foreign governments in the current year or preceding two calendar years.