

Pending Legislation

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Statement of
Patrick Murray, Director
National Legislative Service
Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States

Before the

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity

With Respect To

Pending Legislation

WASHINGTON, D.C.

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 legislation pending before this subcommittee.

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H.R. 291, Vaccine Discharge Parity Act

The VFW opposes this bill. Service members who were separated for refusing to obey a lawful order should be held to the same standard as other service members who committed similar violations. The maximum punishment for violating Article 92—violation of or failure to obey a lawful general order or regulation—is dishonorable discharge, forfeiture of all pay and allowances, and confinement for two years. Lesser offenses have lesser penalties such as receiving a general discharge under honorable conditions.

Additionally, this bill claims to seek parity for service members who received a general discharge under honorable conditions by making them eligible for the Post-9/11 GI Bill. The VFW believes this is an unnecessary proposal. All veterans in this category of discharge, regardless of why they received it, are not eligible for GI Bill benefits. Since these veterans have the same eligibility for education benefits as every other veteran with a general discharge under honorable conditions, parity already exists. We believe any substantive discussion surrounding changes to the discharge conditions eligible for educational assistance must be done broadly and without special treatment, specifically for those failing to obey a lawful order.

H.R. 645, Healthy Foundations for Homeless Veterans Act

The VFW supports this proposal to permanently authorize the use of certain funds to improve flexibility in the provision of assistance to homeless veterans. Combating veteran homelessness is more than just simply providing a roof over a person's head, and oftentimes is accompanied by other financial struggles. This proposal would allow for more flexibility in assisting veterans struggling to acquire food, clothing, hygiene materials, and other items needed for daily life. This holistic effort would hopefully provide additional help for veterans struggling with housing security.

The VFW also believes financial literacy training is important to assist veterans seeking supportive services for housing through the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Too many veterans face housing instability because they are not as financially literate as they could be. We recommend that VA establishes a basic financial literacy tool and ensures every veteran who utilizes supportive services also completes a financial literacy course and undergoes credit counseling. This simple, educational tool can mitigate future dilemmas and the

recurrent need for supportive programs.

H.R. 728, To direct the Assistant Secretary of Labor for Veterans' Employment and Training to carry out a pilot program on short-term fellowship programs for veterans

The VFW supports this proposal that would create a pilot program to offer short-term fellowships for veterans at nonprofit organizations. This initiative would provide opportunities for veterans to receive valuable training and experience at organizations that further a social cause or provide a public benefit. Furthermore, it would create public service employment opportunities for veterans.

H.R. 746, Streamlining Aviation for Eligible (SAFE) Veterans Act

The VFW supports this proposal to provide parity for students seeking flight training at certain institutions through the Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) program. Recent changes allowed student veterans utilizing the GI Bill to attend flight training through educational programs that do not provide a degree. This proposal would allow the same permissions for veterans utilizing Chapter 31 VR&E to pursue flight training at similar institutions.

H.R. 1169, VA E-Notification Enhancement Act

The VFW has for years supported the proposal to make certificates of eligibility electronic. The option of having certificates available digitally is long past due. If VA's information technology systems cannot make this option a reality, then proper funding for a simple solution should be requested, authorized, and appropriated to make this commonsense fix for a 20th century problem. Certificates of eligibility for programs all across VA are constantly requested by outside entities, so an electronic solution is needed. There are certain VA forms that can be accessed through eBenefits, but then those forms must be sent to various parties. Veterans should be able to log in and see all the benefits and programs to which they are entitled, not just disability compensation eligibility.

Discussion Draft, To amend title 38, United States Code, to provide that educational assistance paid under Department of Veterans Affairs educational

assistance programs to an individual who pursued a program or course of education that was suspended or terminated for certain reasons shall not be charged against the entitlement of the individual, and for other purposes

The VFW supports this proposal to ensure veterans who attend schools that have accreditation suspended or terminated do not suffer further fallout such as losing months or years of GI Bill entitlement through no fault of their own. In the past few years, some large schools closed their doors because of poor governance or financial mismanagement. The student veterans who were attending those schools were often unexpectedly forced to find new education options quickly. Far too many of those student veterans were unable to transfer any or all of their credits to other schools, wasting months of work. This proposal would ensure those student veterans could restart their education paths with their GI Bill entitlement restored.

Discussion Draft, To amend title 38, United States Code, to render an individual, who transfers certain educational assistance, to which the individual is entitled because of an agreement by such individual to serve in the Armed Forces, to a dependent of that individual, and who fails to complete such agreement, solely liable for the overpayment of such educational assistance, and for other purposes

The VFW supports this proposal to remove the financial burden for certain beneficiaries of educational assistance. GI Bill transferability often seems like a straightforward option for service members, but occasionally a recipient of this remarkable benefit gets involved in unintended bureaucracy. The VFW agrees that the transferred recipient of the GI Bill should not be held financially liable if the original service member fails to fulfill his or her service obligation. Once discovered, the use of the benefit should cease, but the dependent should not be held accountable for repayment, as they were not the party who failed to complete an obligation.

Discussion Draft, Filipino Education Fairness Act

The VFW has a resolution and supports this bill to provide parity for beneficiaries of the Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance program (Chapter 35) at institutions in the Philippines. We believe VA beneficiaries should have parity in as many cases as practical. Specifically, Chapter 35 recipients utilizing this benefit in the Philippines are provided only fifty percent of the rate compared to beneficiaries in the United States. This is not even equitable with other beneficiaries who utilize this program outside the continental United States. Recipients in other countries around the world receive the same benefit as

everyone else. The inequitable delivery of this benefit to recipients in the Philippines should be corrected.

Discussion Draft, Get Rewarding Outdoor Work (GROW) for our Veterans Act

The VFW supports this proposal that would require VA to report metrics of outcomes for the Warrior Training Advancement Course (WARTAC) and form recommendations for potential expansion to additional federal agencies. The VFW believes a proper and well-rounded transition from the military is one of the most important things our service members need in order to ease back into our society with minimal hardships.

The DOD SkillBridge program is a highly valuable yet sorely underutilized and underpromoted program within the transition process. Oversight and reporting of WARTAC outcomes may provide key insights to inform recommendations for improvements to DOD SkillBridge, and may also provide information for recommendations on expansion to other federal agencies.

Discussion Draft, To amend title 38, United States Code, to expand eligibility for a certain program of job counseling, training, and placement service for veterans

The VFW supports this proposal because we believe one of the most important aspects of a positive transition from active duty service to civilian life is the connection to the community to which the service member will relocate. By law, it is the role of the pre-separation counselor to make that connection to community resources, but we know that is not happening. This is a failure of the Department of Defense (DOD) to properly oversee the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). While we know it is not the role of this committee to ensure TAP is properly administered, we urge Congress as a whole to make sure it is being done.

Recently, DOD amended the DD form 2648 to allow for service members to send their relevant information to state veteran agencies. However, there is no pathway for these agencies to communicate with these separating service members until they leave active duty. This proposal would hopefully ease the burden of transition by allowing for information sharing and two-way communication between the respective agencies and the

service members. We still believe the responsibility lies with the pre-separation counselors to connect the service members with the appropriate resources in the communities to which they are transitioning, but this proposal would be beneficial.

Discussion Draft, VET TEC Authorization Act of 2023

The VFW supports this legislation that would make permanent the Veterans Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) pilot program. VET TEC is an incredibly popular program that permits eligible veterans to receive valuable training in computer software and programming, data processing, information science, and media applications. Indeed, the program is so popular that all available seats for 2021 were filled within one month of the application opening for the new year. During the last Congress, additional resources were provided to the VET TEC program to allow more veterans to utilize this program.

Chairman Van Orden, this concludes my testimony. Again, the VFW thanks you and Ranking Member Levin for the opportunity to testify on these important issues before this subcommittee. I am prepared to take any questions you or the subcommittee members 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 2023, 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.