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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE UNITED STATES SENATE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

Hearing on Post-9/11 GI Bill Improvements

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Judith Flink

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee: My name is Judith Flink. I serve as Executive Director of University Student Financial Services for the three campuses of the University of Illinois. I have worked in the University's business office and been actively involved in higher education for over 30 years. On behalf of myself, colleagues in the AAU Bursar organization, colleagues from other educational institutions around the country, and most importantly, on behalf of the veterans attending or seeking to attend our institutions, I thank you for this opportunity to testify. In particular, I would like to thank Senator Burris and his staff for this invitation – it is an honor for me to be here today.

In 2008, with remarkable leadership from Senator Webb, Congress passed landmark legislation recognizing the contributions and needs of millions of Americans who served their country in our armed forces in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere. This legislation, the Post 9/11 GI Bill, makes possible educational dreams that not only express a special thanks to our veterans, but also contribute directly to the economic recovery and future of America.

America's postsecondary institutions are proud to have supported the enactment of this bill and welcome the opportunity to serve veterans in our classrooms. Today, universities across the country enroll thousands of veterans who receive support through federal GI benefits. Part of my hope in being here is to promote changes to the program that will increase that number.

Unfortunately, as you are aware, implementation of the vitally important education benefits authorized by the bill has not been smooth. Delays in getting the program up and running, followed by numerous subsequent flaws in the interface between the VA and educational institutions, have created hardship for veterans and institutions. My colleagues and I recognize the enormity of implementing this program and creating the systems to manage it. We sincerely applaud the VA for its excellent work in getting the program up and running under difficult circumstances. Our desire is to strengthen our partnership with the VA in an effort to help the program run better.

With that in mind, I focus my testimony on flaws in the system that if corrected will more effectively fulfill the promise of this program. Included with my remarks is a list of concerns compiled by the University of Illinois and 16 peer institutions. While the list is not exhaustive, it identifies major concerns that render access to educational benefits under this program difficult for veterans and expensive for the federal government. Some of these concerns result from legislative provisions, and many are the result of VA policy and procedures.

A number of our legislative concerns are addressed in S. 3447, Senator Akaka's Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Improvements Act of 2010, and other legislation under consideration at this hearing. We support the provisions within these bills that address our concerns. We applaud Congress for its willingness to propose these necessary changes that improve the delivery of benefits. And we hope this testimony leads to further opportunity for collaboration between Congress and the higher education community. Other legislative concerns we have, such as the exclusion of Post-9/11 GI Bill tuition benefits from federal financial aid needs analysis, will require us to work with the education committee to amend the Higher Education Opportunity Act.

The majority of our remaining concerns are administrative in nature. VA policies and procedures often fail to accommodate the education community's existing systems and procedures, thereby creating needless delay and hardship for veterans. I will not belabor the Committee with all the concerns on our attached list. Allow me to highlight just three of them.

Perhaps our greatest concern as university business officers is the VA's refund policy which requires institutions to refund tuition overpayments to students who must then refund them back to the VA. This policy mirrors that of the original GI Bill wherein all benefits (including tuition) were paid directly to the students who were then responsible for paying their tuition bills to the school and for refunding any overpayments back to the VA. But under the Post 9/11 GI Bill, tuition benefits are paid to the school not the student. Therefore, the requirement to refund overpayments to students instead of directly to the VA is not only inefficient, it also puts students at risk of losing future benefit eligibility under the program if they fail to understand or fulfill their responsibility to return those funds to the VA. This risk is high. In all other financial aid programs, overpayments are refunded directly to the aid source bypassing the student. Thus, students have come to expect that when they receive a refund from the school it is theirs to use for books and living expenses. By the time they receive notification from the VA of the amount they must repay, the money may have been spent. The VA will then suspend future benefit eligibility until payment is received which would delay or prevent the student from continuing their education.

A second major concern is the VA's remittance of payment for students for whom the institution has certified a different amount, or for whom the institution has not even completed a Certificate of Eligibility. No explanation is provided with these payments. Therefore, the institution must contact the VA for an explanation of the discrepancy before releasing payment to the student. When the institution calls, the VA's phone lines have long delays with hold times up to 40 minutes. Sometimes calls are dropped altogether due to the high volume and the institution must dial again. For months, the VA's phone lines were closed on Thursdays and Fridays. These delays and their resultant hardship to the Veteran could be eliminated if the VA included an adequate explanation to the school with each payment.

Our third concern is a lack of published guidance. The VA has published no clear guidance regarding several key elements of benefit eligibility. This lack of guidance results in increased administrative burdens and frustration on the part of veterans. The creation of a readily accessible Post-9/11 GI Bill policy manual would eliminate the majority of this frustration and burden.

While I've only mentioned three of our concerns, the attached list is more comprehensive. We are confident, however, that many of them can be successfully resolved through open dialogue between schools and the VA. Our recent attempts to initiate this dialogue met with disappointing results. We received a written response from the VA, for which we are grateful, but were not given the opportunity to discuss the matter in more detail or open a meaningful dialogue.

My peers and I respectfully ask your assistance to open this dialogue. We believe regularly scheduled meetings between the VA and a working group from the education community will enable both parties to collaborate on proposed program changes and regulations prior to implementation. We would like to be considered as both a resource and partner for the VA and Congress in our mutual endeavor to improve delivery of Post 9/11 GI Bill tuition benefits to our veterans.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you. I hope my testimony can be a spring board for productive dialogue between all parties who share your commitment to strengthening and improving services to our veteran community. I would be pleased to respond to any questions members of the committee might have.