

**STATEMENT OF
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VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION
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SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

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Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Moran and Members of the Committee. We appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss Veterans' education, employment programs, and the Loan Guaranty Program. Accompanying me today is Ricardo Da Silva, Education Service Program Integration Officer. VA is committed to assisting our 200,000 Service members transition to civilian life. Whether education, employment, or purchasing a home, we are working to improve access and outcomes for Veterans. Before I delve into how we are delivering for our Veterans, I want to touch on an evolving crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed global and US supply chain weaknesses and we expect the manufacturing and distribution disruptions to extend into Fiscal Year (FY) 2023. As the virus spread, overall consumer demand decreased and industrial activity, in turn, decreased due to the lower consumer demand and effects of COVID-19. With the increasing level of vaccination globally and the end of lockdowns in many nations, consumer demand increased dramatically, while supply chains continue to face big challenges, including worker shortages and limitations in access to raw materials and key components. VA is actively addressing these challenges, implementing near-term methods to ensure internal VA supply chain resiliency, including increased demand signal monitoring, identification of alternatives for preferred products, and treating medical products as enterprise assets. Effective national response requires a resilient public health supply chain, anchored in domestic manufacturing capabilities so that care and preventive measures can reach patients. Sustaining the resilience of the supply chain is critical for national security, and VA is working with the White House and Executive Branch agencies to develop and implement the actions identified in the National Strategy for a Resilient Public Health Supply Chain.

Within Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) has overall responsibility for the provision of services to Veterans to enable a successful reintegration into civilian life. VBA also is responsible for assisting eligible Veterans and dependents with achieving overall economic well-being through a holistic suite of benefit programs. VBA has continued to serve Veterans and other eligible beneficiaries throughout the COVID-19 pandemic without any break in service. We adjusted our policies and how we deliver benefits to ensure maximum protections are in place for Veterans to stay safe while continuing to apply for and receive the benefits to which they may be entitled. In addition to changes VBA made to internal processes, timely legislation also helped us to adapt certain programs to ensure Veterans receive

the support they need.

VBA's programs support Veterans in preparing for, obtaining and maintaining productive employment. We provide education benefits to ensure Veterans have the skills and credentials necessary to compete in the job market. We offer outreach and personalized career counseling to ensure Veterans have the support and guidance to select their education and career paths. We provide military-to-civilian transition support and direct skills provision and readiness for jobs within VA. VBA collaborates with the Department of Labor (DOL) and private sector partners on military and Veteran employment-focused programs.

Education

Each year, approximately 200,000 Service members transition to civilian life. Over 875,000 Veterans, Service members and family members used VA education benefits last year alone, receiving over \$11 billion in education and training related benefits. The GI Bill provides an opportunity to skill up for the civilian workforce by expanding opportunities for Service members, Veterans and eligible family members to pursue their academic goals, by enhancing the Nation's economic strength with innovative programs that support employment in high demand fields and by enriching lives by giving beneficiaries the tools they need to further their education to lead to fulfilling careers. To ensure we serve all Veterans seeking to use their GI Bill benefits and equip them with the tools and resources necessary to reach their academic and career goals, we are modernizing the GI Bill's information technology (IT) platform to deliver benefits faster, provide better customer service and strengthen our compliance and oversight activities.

Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC)

VA is experiencing high demand for the VET TEC 5-year pilot program that provides tuition and housing assistance to help Veterans advance in an IT career. Through VET TEC training programs, Veterans acquire high-tech skills to assist them in moving quickly into in-demand jobs in the following five areas: information science, computer programming, data processing, media applications and computer science. VET TEC training programs typically are shorter than traditional college programs. Usually a VET TEC program runs from 6 to 28 weeks in length, which allows Veterans to complete training and enter the job market more rapidly. Since launching the VET TEC program on April 1, 2019, VA has certified entitlement for 32,184 eligible Veterans; 757 Veterans are currently enrolled; and 1,437 Veterans have secured employment out of the 2,603 who have graduated. On average, students are earning approximately a \$60,000 annual salary. Due to the popularity of the VET TEC program, and in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic, VA exhausted the \$45 million available for fiscal year (FY) 2021 on August 23, 2021.

In October 2020, VA launched the VET TEC Employer Consortium to bridge the gap between program completion and meaningful employment. The collaboration

between Training Providers, Employers and VA within the VET TEC Employer Consortium creates a key space for students to make connections, attend events hosted by VA and employer-partners and be primed for employment success at the completion of their program. The Employer Consortium seeks to engage VET TEC participants by hosting events where VA connects participants and those supporting the program, including employer-partners, and other partners committed to Veteran hiring. The Employer Consortium supports VA's commitment to shorten the hiring window from the time of program completion to employment in the field of study.

VA has partnered with 14 employer-partners, to include VA's own Office of Information and Technology, that seek qualified VET TEC graduates for filling internal IT vacancies. The other employer-partners are Accenture, Amazon, Blackbox, Delaware Resource Group of Oklahoma, Electronic On-Ramp, ERA Solutions, MITRE, Oaklea Simpson Security, Skillstorm, VetsEZ, Veterans In Parking, Walmart and Windstream. VA also has partnered with Hiring Our Heroes and LinkedIn to provide resources that increase VET TEC graduates' success in being hired and provide opportunities for employers to locate them. In VA's partnership with LinkedIn, graduates are able to receive one-year of access to LinkedIn Premium. These premium accounts entitle graduates to enhanced career connections and access to LinkedIn's library of online courses.

Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program (VRRAP)

On March 11, 2021, President Biden signed Public Law 117-2 (the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021) into law. Section 8006 of this law requires VA to carry out VRRAP, which provides up to 12 months of retraining assistance via covered programs of education to not more than 17,250 eligible Veterans who are unemployed due to a covered public health emergency. Eligible individuals receive a monthly housing allowance for each month a covered program of education is pursued, and retraining assistance is paid directly to institutions in increments: 50% at the beginning of the program of education, 25% at the completion of the program and 25% after the Veteran finds employment in a field related to the program of education. VA collaborated with DOL to identify high-demand occupations and successfully implemented the VRRAP program 60 days after enactment. As of October 1, 2021, there are 2,111 program participants. VA received 10,440 applications for VRRAP benefits, 6,938 Veterans received a Certificate of Eligibility and 3,191 applicants have been determined ineligible. The two most common reasons for a determination of ineligibility for participation in VRRAP is that an applicant is currently eligible for GI Bill or Veteran Readiness & Employment benefits or has no qualifying military service. Currently, 128 Veterans have graduated from programs using VRRAP benefits and 804 training providers have been approved for VRRAP. To date, VA has obligated \$61.4 million of the \$386 million in total program funding.

Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship

The Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship provides additional GI Bill benefits toward qualifying science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) degrees. Since its inception in August 2019, VA has awarded \$195 million in scholarships, and currently there are 6,500 Rogers STEM Scholars. The STEM workforce is projected to grow by 8.05% from 2019 to 2029, compared to 3.7% growth for non-STEM occupations. VA found that 18 of the 20 highest paying careers in 2020 were in STEM fields. In 2019, the median annual wage of a STEM occupation was \$90,000 compared to all occupations at \$42,000 and non-STEM occupations at \$40,000. Thanks to recent legislation, beneficiaries pursuing dual-degree and approved clinical training programs for healthcare professionals are now eligible for this scholarship.

Post-9/11 GI Bill—On-the-Job Training and Apprenticeship

The Post-9/11 GI Bill, which became effective on August 1, 2009, is the most used of VA's education programs. This program provides educational assistance, generally in the form of tuition and fees, monthly housing allowance and a books and supplies stipend, to assist Veterans and their families in reaching their educational or vocational goals. The Post-9/11 GI Bill also offers job training through on-the-job (OJT) and apprenticeship programs and the opportunity to earn money through VA's work-study program. OJT and apprenticeship programs allow Veterans to learn a trade or skill through training on the job rather than attending a program comprised primarily, or solely, of formal classroom instruction. A Veteran generally enters into a training contract for a specific period with an employer or union, and at the end of the training period, the Veteran gains job certification or journeyman status. During FY 2021, there were 8,569 individuals enrolled in on-the-job training and 15,006 individuals enrolled in apprenticeship programs under the Post-9/11 GI Bill. We continue to look for ways to expand opportunities under these programs and increase participation among Veterans and industry partners.

Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) Program

The VR&E program is authorized under title 38, United States Code, and is referred to as the Chapter 31 program. It assists entitled Veterans and Service members with a 10% or more service-connected disability rating and an employment handicap to prepare for, obtain and maintain suitable employment.

In August 2020, the VR&E program collaborated with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Animal Plant Health Inspection Service, on a national job fair exclusively for VR&E Veterans through non-competitive hiring. Over 700 VR&E Veterans and Service members registered for the event, with 354 applications submitted for 49 vacancies. Over 120 of the VR&E applicants were referred to hiring managers. On July 30, 2021, VR&E partnered with Microsoft to hold a virtual Veteran career fair event that included 33 VR&E business partners providing information on employment opportunities in Computer Science, Business, Program/Management Analysis, Information Technology, Customer Service/Support, and Software Engineering. The event was attended by

2,649 Veterans, including 1,167 VR&E participants.

In FY 2019, the VR&E program completed 10,939 employment rehabilitations. Since March 2020, the VR&E program has shared over 1,945 job leads with VR&E field staff of which more than 640 were virtual. In FY 2020, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, there were 9,541 employment rehabilitations with an average salary of just over \$59,631. In FY 2021, the VR&E program had over 10,600 employment rehabilitations.

The VR&E program has created several memoranda of understanding focused on expanding opportunities for Veterans to participate in a Non-Paid-Work Experience (NPWE) at a federal, state, or local government agency. The NPWE program is ideal for Veterans and Service members who have clear career goals and benefit from learning in a hands-on setting who may have had a hard time getting a job due to lack of experience. Additionally, the NPWE leverages opportunities to use the Schedule A hiring authority to help service-connected Veterans enter the federal workforce. Schedule "A" authority allows agencies to hire eligible Veterans and persons with disabilities, without competition. VR&E recently expanded NPWE opportunities to include several new federal government agencies and as a result of this, the VR&E program was able to develop 700 NPWE opportunities in FY 2020 and created over 300 NPWE opportunities in FY 2021.

The VR&E program continues its longstanding relationship with DOL, focusing on the areas of job placement services and the targeted labor market information. This partnership has expanded to DOL's Office of Apprenticeship, which focuses on increasing the use of apprenticeships within the VR&E program and has resulted in Apprenticeship Pilots at six VR&E regional offices.

COVID-19 Legislation

Timely legislation greatly helped VA to ensure Veterans receive the support they need and that maximum protections are in place for Veterans to stay safe while continuing to apply for and receive the benefits to which they may be entitled. From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, VA has worked with Congress to preserve GI Bill benefits for those students impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, Public Law 116-128, Public Law 116-140 (Student Veteran Coronavirus Response Act of 2020) and section 5202 of Public Law 116-159 (Continuing Appropriations Act, 2021 and Other Extensions Act) were enacted. These laws gave VA temporary authority (from March 1, 2020, through December 21, 2021) to pay education benefits and Monthly Housing Allowance payments to GI Bill students at the higher in-person training rate when a student was forced to convert to online learning solely due to the COVID-19 pandemic and provided other education and training related relief in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, Public Law 116-315 (Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020) further extends COVID-19 relief through various authorities to continue to pay benefits based on a student's enrollment status prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and provides other assistance that helps to minimize the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on a student's educational

benefits and goals.

To raise awareness and encourage usage of the expanded authorities available to VA to mitigate the financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, VA launched a multifaceted communications campaign that featured a significant presence on social media and inclusion in VA's "coronavirus chatbot." Additionally, in support of GI Bill beneficiaries seeking careers in high-demand STEM and technology fields, VA ensured that those receiving or seeking assistance through the Rogers STEM Scholarship or VET TEC Pilot Program received award letters and other benefit information electronically to ensure no interruption in their education.

To ensure our beneficiaries maintain their earned benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic, VA has worked closely with our partners to develop policies that allow Veterans and their families to continue to receive their education benefits in a virtual environment.

Outreach

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, VBA focused efforts on virtual modernization and outreach by deploying updated and new efforts to engage with transitioning Service members and Veteran populations. VBA quickly shifted to using additional platforms to provide outreach, which previously had been conducted almost all in person.

VR&E outreach efforts in FY 2020 and FY 2021 focused on modernization and reaching out to Veterans and partners virtually. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the VR&E program has participated in national conferences, such as Student Veterans of America's annual National Conference and School Certifying Official Conference. The VR&E program also has conducted numerous virtual 101 briefings to partners, such as the Department of Defense's Wounded Warrior Regiments and Military Service Coordinators. In addition, the VR&E program was rebranded and renamed in FY 2020. The rebranding and renaming were publicized with a Satellite Media Tour, podcasts and briefings with all of VR&E's partners, such as Congress, Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) and Veterans. VBA's Education Service maintained a robust communication and outreach effort during the global COVID-19 pandemic to ensure GI Bill beneficiaries and partners were provided timely updates on the COVID-19 pandemic, Public Law 116-315, Digital GI Bill, and VRRAP, including over 250 GovDelivery emails to over 830,000 students, School Certifying Officials, State Approval Agency and VSO partners totaling 45.5 million emails.

To further expand Education Service's reach, VA used social media platforms like Facebook to post over 280 posts to nearly 113,000 followers. Education Service conducted over 60 outreach events to include hosting five VET TEC Employer Consortium events with Chamber of Commerce's Hiring Our Heroes assisting over 400 VET TEC graduates in finding employment with companies like Black Box and VetsEZ and in developing effective resumes and interview techniques. In addition, VBA's Outreach, Transition and Economic Development Service expanded outreach to the

virtual platform. Specifically, VBA's Transition Assistance Program connected Service members and their loved ones to VA resources with VA Benefits Advisors providing web-based and virtual briefings with more than 49,000 One-on-One Remote Assistance sessions worldwide. VBA also shifted to virtual Economic Development Initiative (EDI) events and hosted virtual EDIs in San Antonio, Texas and Jacksonville, North Carolina. EDIs connect transitioning Service members, newly separated Service members and military spouses in specific geographic communities with information and resources that promote economic well-being. Such resources can include Town Hall meetings, Partnership Roundtables, Benefits Fairs, Claims Clinics, Hiring Fairs and workshops.

With a need to increase support during these economically challenging times, VBA launched the Personalized Career Planning and Guidance (PCPG) program (Chapter 36). VBA's PCPG program is an opportunity for Service members, Veterans and dependents to receive personalized counseling and support to help guide their career paths, ensure most effective use of their VA benefits, and achieve their career goals. Since the launch of the PCPG program on January 4, 2021, VBA processed an unprecedented 7,000+ applications, thus providing critical education and career support to transitioning Service members, Veterans and eligible dependents.

During FY 2021, VBA completed 6,771 outreach events and devoted roughly 14,230 hours to outreach events, thus reaching over 200,000 individuals and accumulating 8,943 claims as a result of these outreach events.

Due to the existence of a virtual platform, VBA expanded our reach to Service members, Veterans, their families and caregivers and has new ways of delivering services and providing a path for success in a post-COVID-19 environment.

Digital GI Bill

On March 11, 2021, VA awarded a contract to Accenture Federal Services, which will partner with Education Service and VA's Office of Information and Technology to develop the Digital GI Bill. The Digital GI Bill is a modernized business platform that will feature world-class customer and financial services to enable timely and accurate delivery of payments, real-time eligibility and benefit information. This new platform will provide an end-to-end systems management perspective to ensure proper compliance and oversight of GI Bill programs and will allow the use of data and business intelligence tools to monitor and measure school and student outcomes. Using this platform, GI Bill students will have the ability to engage with VA and their earned benefits through electronic outreach, intake and communication tools for on-the-spot service.

The Digital GI Bill project is now six months underway, and has successfully completed its first major milestone: transitioning Post-9/11 GI Bill claims adjudication from legacy systems to a managed service in September 2021. The managed service streamlines business services and practices into a single, managed platform, accommodates agile decision making and changes in technology, and reduces the

need for manual and redundant processes. By engaging in over 100 feedback and focus group sessions with 400+ beneficiaries and key stakeholders, the Digital GI Bill team is working through system and interface updates to bring modernized changes to nearly 1 million beneficiaries with near real time updates on eligibility and enrollment, accurate and efficient claims processing and payments, and easier correspondence with VA through means such as text. GI Bill beneficiaries and education staff will continue to see modernized updates and increased access to education benefits with incremental process improvements through FY22.

Conclusion

VA appreciates the efforts of the Administration and Congress to ensure Veterans and their families have strong economic outcomes. VA will continue to strengthen our initiatives to achieve this goal.

This concludes my testimony. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today, and we are happy to answer any questions you may have.