

Chairman Patty Murray

Opening Statement of Chairman Murray
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Hearing: Economic Opportunity and Transition Legislation
June 13, 2012

“Welcome to today’s hearing to examine economic opportunity and transition legislation pending before this Committee. We have a very ambitious agenda, which reflects the hard work of members on both sides of the aisle.

There are many critical bills on today’s agenda, but I want to speak briefly about two items that I believe capture the challenges we are working to address - including the need to ensure our veterans have every opportunity to jumpstart their careers when they return home from service.

The first piece of legislation is the GI Bill Consumer Awareness Act of 2012.

As we all know, with the end of the war in Iraq and the drawdown in Afghanistan, more servicemembers are separating from the military and coming home to a difficult job market that demands skilled employees. Very often the first step veterans take when they return home is to utilize the revamped educational benefits that we have provided them. From four year colleges to apprentice programs, veterans are using benefits like the GI Bill to build and translate their military skills and leadership ability with the additional expertise they need to prosper in the civilian workforce. In fact this year alone, over 590,000 servicemembers, veterans, and other beneficiaries are expected to enroll in educational institutions using the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

As a result, VA is expected to spend over \$9 billion in 2012 on Post-9/11 GI Bill payments and over \$2 billion for the nearly 400,000 beneficiaries of the VA’s other education programs. Given this commitment, we owe it to every single veteran to ensure they are getting the full potential of this lucrative and potentially life-changing benefit.

But what I hear from veterans is that too often this is not the case.

Veterans have repeatedly told me they lack the proper information they need to determine what educational institution to attend. Or even that sometimes they feel they are being taken for a ride by institutions with lousy records of helping our veterans build a foundation for career success.

And that’s why I have introduced the GI Bill Consumer Awareness Act of 2012.

It’s a bill that is designed to ensure our servicemembers and veterans have the facts they need to make informed decisions about the schools they attend. It’s a bill that calls for educational institutions to disclose, among other data: statistics related to student loan debt, transferability of credits, veteran enrollment, program preparation for licensing and certification, and job placement rates. So veterans can comparison shop – with the data they need. So they have a report card that shows whether schools are making the grade.

The bill also addresses concerns about organizations that mislead our servicemembers and veterans just to boost enrollment of students that are paying using the generous benefits taxpayers provide. It does this by requiring VA and DoD to develop a joint policy to curb aggressive recruiting and misleading marketing aimed at servicemembers and veterans. Providing accessible and effective educational benefits to our veterans is vital as so many veterans transition out of the military in the years ahead. I am so pleased that in addition to this bill there are several other education bill's on today's agenda. I look forward to working with the sponsors of all of these bills to ensure we are giving veterans every resource to succeed in the classroom and in the job market.

The second bill I'd like to mention is the Servicemembers Rights Enforcement Improvement Act of 2012.

This is a bill that I wish wasn't necessary but one that circumstances demand. It builds on current protections put in place to help shield our nation's heroes from unemployment and foreclosure. These protections have been violated in a disturbing number of cases within the past several years. This bill would strengthen the ability of the Department of Justice and Office of Special Counsel to investigate and enforce the employment protections of USERRA, which are so important to members of the National Guard and Reserve. And it would improve the protections of the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act as well as how they are enforced.

I introduced this bill because we as a nation owe it to the men and women who serve with dignity a guarantee that the protections put in place to ease their burden will be enforced when they return home. This legislation will ensure the Departments charged with enforcing these valuable protections have the tools they need to get the job done.

I also look forward to discussing other proposals to strengthen the protections of the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act. This Committee will continue to work to ensure our men and women in uniform have the best package of protections possible.

We have seen a lot of success this Congress with the legislation we have been able to advance on behalf of veterans – the VOW to Hire Heroes Act is a great example and I'm pleased we are already seeing many of the benefits of that bill. We have other bills that have been reported out of this Committee that we are working with the House to move forward. That legislation would provide many improvements for veterans health care and benefits, including the health care that former residents of Camp Lejeune so desperately need. But we don't want to harm other veterans as we find a way to pay for that legislation. I thank Senator Burr for his leadership on this effort and am hopeful that we can move forward with that package soon.

During the last year, this Committee has been very focused on improving and expanding upon employment and training programs for veterans. I am pleased today we have the opportunity to discuss Senator Nelson's bill, which would create a veterans job corps. I am eager for a productive discussion about this bill and all of the items on this agenda.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses, and I want to thank you all for joining us this morning.”