

JOYCE CANGE DIRECTOR, CLEVELAND REGIONAL OFFICE VETERANS BENEFITS
ADMINISTRATION (VBA)

STATEMENT OF JOYCE CANGE DIRECTOR, CLEVELAND REGIONAL OFFICE
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U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS FIELD HEARING ON VETERANS
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Senator Brown and Committee Members, thank you for inviting me today to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) efforts to assist Veterans in obtaining gainful, suitable careers through the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program. I will provide an overview of national programs and highlight the services provided to Ohio Veterans by the Cleveland Regional Office.

I want to begin by emphasizing the Post-9/11 GI Bill's contribution to providing education and training to our newest generation of Veterans, which will lead them into the career paths of their choosing. Through the end of November 2011, VA has issued nearly \$15 billion in Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit payments to approximately 650,000 individuals and educational institutions. Of the 594,000 students who received Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits nationwide in FY 2011, 12,700 students were from Ohio.

VA continues to be a leading agency in the hiring of Veterans. VA for Vets, VA's new recruitment, retention, and reintegration program, was created to increase Veteran hiring throughout VA and help Veterans achieve success in their VA careers. Veterans understand the mission of VA, and we look to tap into their experience and knowledge, and use them as front-line resources in helping VA better serve their fellow Veterans. We are pleased to announce that 30.5 percent of VA employees are Veterans. We are certain that our new Veteran-centric employment programs and outreach will help us

increase the number of Veterans who call VA home. We look forward to filling the currently open positions VA-wide in Ohio with as many Veterans as possible. We understand that honoring our sacred trust with Veterans means doing all we can to help them find work when they come home.

Veteran Employment

Our Nation's Servicemembers and Veterans come to us with great skills and valuable experiences and are vital assets to the civilian labor market. They have excellent leadership skills and have mastered how to work as team members. They have determination, focus, discipline, and diligence in their work ethic. Although many leave the military with transferable job skills that allow employers to hire them immediately, other Veterans require assistance in preparing for fulfilling careers. Possible barriers that Veterans face may include lack of suitable education, lack of transferable work skills desired for civilian employment, limited networks in their career field of interest, or unresolved financial issues. Many Veterans have injuries, disabilities, and illnesses that prevent them from utilizing the job skills they have developed. Veterans may also be unaware of how to address limitations from the disabilities with an employer and how to request reasonable accommodations. In addition, employers in the civilian sector may have misconceptions about Veterans with disabilities and they may be apprehensive about hiring them. National Guard and Reserve component members transitioning face unique challenges in that companies they worked for may no longer exist, additional skill sets may be needed to continue to climb the career ladder, and they may be at a disadvantage with their peers who have received promotions while they were deployed. Further, because deployment for this group differs from the active duty component, Guard and Reserve members may not have the opportunity to attend Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP) sessions that would assist with reintegration into the civilian workforce. The VR&E program is fully committed to assisting Guard and Reserve members, Servicemembers, and Veterans by broadening the availability of transition services such as TAP and DTAP and by providing comprehensive

rehabilitation services that help reduce or eliminate these barriers so Veterans can maintain careers to the maximum extent possible.

Helping Veterans Achieve Their Career Goals

The primary mission of VR&E is to assist Veterans with service-connected disabilities in preparing for, obtaining, and maintaining suitable careers and maximum levels of independence in their daily living. Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors engage Veterans in ongoing vocational exploration, allowing Veterans to identify career goals that fully utilize their skill sets and meet current labor-market demands. The Veteran and counselor develop an individually-tailored rehabilitation plan that maps the necessary steps for the Veteran to reach his or her ultimate career goal.

When Veterans have the necessary skills to obtain employment, they are provided immediate job-placement services in collaboration with the Department of Labor Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS) program. These services may include job-seeking skills training, such as resume development; mock interviewing and interview coaching; lessons on how to search for jobs and the best resources to use; and how to navigate and complete web-based job applications. The VR&E Employment Coordinator also provides assistance to Veterans with these tasks, including developing relationships with employers to match the Veterans' skill sets with employer staffing needs.

Some Veterans have a reasonable amount of work skills or have satisfactory education, but are lacking recent work experience. VR&E administers the Non-Paid Work Experience Program

(NPWE), which provides eligible Veterans with practical job experience at a government facility. There is no cost to the employer, and the Veteran receives a subsistence allowance from VA. This allows Veterans to learn current work skills on the job, update their resumes with current work experience, and develop valuable employment network connections. The program also gives the Federal employer the authority to hire the Veteran non-competitively after completion of the NPWE placement.

Another program available to Veterans through VR&E is the On-The-Job Training

(OJT) program, which allows any employer to hire qualified Veterans at a trainee wage

and also qualifies private-sector employers for tax incentives. VR&E provides Veterans with ongoing case management, reasonable accommodations, and all the required tools, uniforms, and supplies they may need to learn their new jobs.

Through the Special Employer Incentive program (SEI), VR&E provides assistance to employers hiring Veterans at the apprentice level. The SEI program is an up-to-nine-month program, in which the employer hires the Veteran and qualifies for reimbursement of up to 50 percent of the Veteran's salary. This reimbursement covers the costs of training, supplies, and equipment; and compensates the employer for a decrease in production while the Veteran is in training.

VR&E also encourages federal employers to use "Schedule A" hiring authority when assisting Veterans with obtaining federal employment. This specialized hiring authority allows federal hiring officials to appoint qualified people with disabilities non-competitively (5 C.F.R. § 213.3102(u)). This is of benefit to the employer and Veteran, as no vacancy announcement is required and the traditional hiring process can be expedited. The qualified Veteran can be offered a position without competing against other non-Veteran applicants. An equivalent special hiring authority is available for any Veteran who has completed a VR&E program. Federal tax credits of up to \$24,000 per year are also used to incentivize private-sector businesses to hire Veterans. Veterans can also pursue a track of service to become self-employed. VR&E assists in evaluating and refining business plans, training in managing independent businesses, providing referrals for consultation services with small-business experts, and support of some start-up costs for the Veterans with the most serious disabilities.

During FY 2011, VR&E received 65,111 applications, and currently has approximately 107,900 participants in all facets of the program. Of those Veterans, approximately 58,400 are engaged in rehabilitation plans leading toward gainful career outcomes. As a result of increased returning Servicemembers and VR&E's aggressive outreach program, the number of Veterans needing employment and independent living services through VR&E is expected to increase in FY 2012 and FY 2013. Despite the current economic challenges, VR&E services helped approximately 10,000 Veterans in FY 2011 to reach their employment and independent living goals.

VR&E Initiatives and Partnerships to Promote Hiring Veterans

VR&E is working on a number of initiatives and specialized services to promote the hiring of our Nation's Veterans. A specialized web site unique to VR&E is VetSuccess.gov that includes job postings specifically targeted for Veteran applicants. Currently, the job board feature of VetSuccess.gov connects over 90,000 registered Veterans with over 7,500 registered employers. Through VetSuccess.gov, Veterans have access to job resources, resume development tools, and military-to-civilian work- skill analysis tools. VetSuccess.gov also gives Veterans access to the

Vet Central job career board of over eight million jobs. In addition, it links to Simply Hired, Indeed, and Google. VR&E's aggressive marketing of VetSuccess.gov to Veterans, separating Servicemembers, and employers has led to an exponential increase in Veteran registrations, resumes, and employer interest. In fiscal year (FY) 2011, the site had nearly 48 million hits. Visitors to the VetSuccess.gov main page can peruse the "VetSuccess News" section that provides information pertinent to Servicemembers, Veterans, and their family members in all phases of their transition. Visitors also have access to job tools and tips, resume tips, and a link to the Veterans Online Application (VONAPP) website so they may apply for VA benefits online. Registered Veterans can search for jobs and upload their resumes onto VetSuccess.gov for registered employers to view.

Employers can search existing Veteran resumes to find Veterans by security clearance, geographic location, vocational specialty, and special hiring authority eligibility. Employers can also post job announcements, promote special hiring events, and generate "Resume Books" of Veterans they have handpicked for hiring consideration. VA will continue to enhance VetSuccess.gov to increase the resources available to Veterans and employers.

VR&E is continually developing and maintaining effective partnerships at both the local and national level. Outreach to employer partners is a critical activity to increase employment opportunities. VR&E uses a variety of communication methods to connect employers with staffing needs with qualified and job-ready Veterans, including e-mail announcements to Veterans regarding new job opportunities, invitations to employers as guest speakers on national monthly conference calls with all VR&E staff, and

participation in and hosting of national and regional job fairs. The VR&E program currently has a number of memorandums of understanding (MOU) in place with organizations to promote comprehensive services and employment for Veterans. For example, organizations that frequently accept Veterans in the NPWE program include Social Security Administration and Department of Treasury. US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Department of State, and VA often hire Veterans non-competitively.

Additionally, the Department of Labor and VR&E have a national MOU to join efforts with counselors and state employment office outreach employees to help Veterans obtain employment. VR&E also works with many non-profit organizations and state Vocational Rehabilitation agencies to ensure Veterans receive adequate services not offered through VR&E. These partnerships are invaluable because they allow for Veterans to receive the services they need for all facets of their lives, which in turn facilitates and supports further success in their employment endeavors.

VR&E has also reached out to local college and university campuses to implement the VetSuccess on Campus program. This program is currently at eight locations, to include Cleveland State, and is designed to ease the transition from Servicemember to Veteran by coordinating Veterans' benefits smoothly and seamlessly. Each campus has a full-time Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor and a part-time Vet Center outreach coordinator. These VA employees provide motivational and outreach activities to Veterans utilizing the Post 9/11 GI Bill benefit, assist Veterans in overcoming barriers in their educational and vocational programs, provide readjustment counseling and transitional support, provide needed medical and other referrals, and provide other general benefits assistance. In collaboration with the Veterans Health Administration, this

program is being expanded to twenty additional colleges in FY 2012.

Post-9/11 GI Bill

The Post-9/11 GI Bill, enacted in 2008, is the most extensive educational assistance program authorized since the original GI Bill was signed into law in 1944. Just as the original GI Bill allowed Veterans to take their educational opportunities and

leverage them for breakthroughs in automation, business, medicine, science, transportation, and technology, today's Post-9/11 GI Bill provides our Veterans with the tools that will help them contribute to an economically strong, vibrant, and resilient America. VA is committed to ensuring all Servicemembers, Veterans, and their family members who may be eligible for this important benefit, receive a useful education without the burden of substantial student loan debt as they readjust to civilian life and work to achieve their employment goals.

Vocational Training under the Post-9/11 GI Bill

Effective October 1, 2011, VA implemented the recent changes in law that now allow eligible Veterans, Servicemembers, and dependents to pursue vocational training under the Post-9/11 GI Bill. This includes non-college degree programs such as on-the-job training, flight school programs (other than a private pilot's license), apprenticeship training, correspondence courses, and other programs offered at non-degree schools. VA has already received non-college degree enrollments for Fall 2011 from approximately 3,400 individuals. We anticipate that enrollment in these types of vocational training programs will continue to grow, significantly expanding employment options and opportunities for our Veterans.

Cleveland VR&E Division

The Cleveland Regional Office's (RO) VR&E Division provides the full range of employment-related assistance described in the national overview at the local level to Ohio Veterans with disabilities. The Cleveland VR&E Division, with employees in the Cleveland RO and out-based benefits offices in Columbus and Cincinnati, relies heavily on partnering with State agencies, other Federal agencies, local academic institutions, and community-based organizations to promote Veteran employment. Most notably, on August 19, 2011, the Cleveland VR&E Division, U.S. Department of Labor's Veterans Employment and Training Service, and the Ohio Department of Job and Family

Services (ODJFS) signed a memorandum of agreement to jointly affirm inter-agency cooperation in helping disabled Veterans obtain stable, gainful, and satisfying employment. To support this partnership, an ODJFS Disabled Veteran Outreach

Program (DVOP) Coordinator is co-located with the Cleveland VR&E Division. The Cleveland Employment Coordinators collaborate with the DVOP Coordinator by utilizing DVOP's

extensive network of employers to match Veterans with career opportunities.

The Cleveland RO's Employment Coordinator works directly with the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services and establishes a team approach to assist each Veteran.

As a participant in the VetSuccess on Campus Program, the Cleveland RO maintains a productive partnership with Cleveland State University's (CSU) Student Veteran Success Program. Through this partnership, a VR&E counselor is out-based at CSU as a "VetSuccess Coordinator" to provide general benefits and assistive counseling services to Veteran-students. Counseling is geared toward assisting Veteran-to-student transition; access to VA benefits to which Veteran-students may be entitled; retention and completion of academic programs; referrals for medical, financial, or other counseling services to overcome barriers to success; and ultimately job placement. The VetSuccess counselor also assists with referrals of eligible Veterans for careers in the Federal sector, including employment opportunities with VA.

The Cleveland VR&E Division participated in several outreach activities during FY

2011, including participation in four School Certifying Official workshops, five job fairs, a homeless Veterans' outreach event, and a Faith Based and Neighborhood Partnership Roundtable event.

In the Columbus area, a separate Employment Coordinator provides job placement and employment services. This individual also networks with local employers, establishing Veteran apprenticeships and on-the-job training programs. Assigned to the RO's Columbus out-based benefits office is a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor, whose outreach efforts include attending job fairs, sharing information to out-processing National Guard units, and other information dissemination functions. Furthermore, an ODJFS DVOP is assigned to the Columbus out-based benefits office to support VA's hiring initiatives, Veteran employment opportunities, and coordination of seamless benefits delivery between the two agencies. Three of the Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors in the Columbus out-based benefits office are Veterans themselves, further demonstrating VA's commitment to have Veterans serve Veterans.

The Cleveland RO management team is making every effort to hire and promote Veterans. In FY 2009 alone, nearly 60 percent of all new hires, including those hired under funding from the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA), were Veterans. This hiring program and subsequent hiring opportunities resulted in Veterans comprising 36 percent of the current Cleveland VARO staff. Nearly 16 percent of the office's staff are disabled Veterans.

VA's Veteran Employment Services Office Promotes Veteran Hiring

VA for Vets is a comprehensive career development program that helps Veterans launch or advance their civilian careers at VA. From dynamic job searches and military skills translation to professional development and deployment lifecycle support – there is something for every Veteran at VA for Vets.

The Veteran Employment Services Office (VESO), a new organization within VA, was established specifically to oversee VA for Vets. The VESO office is the first VA organization dedicated exclusively to ensuring the career success of our Veteran employees. VESO's strategic goals include raising the overall percentage of Veterans in VA's workforce by expanding and enhancing recruitment efforts and encouraging reintegration through enhanced deployment lifecycle support. Through VA for Vets, VA will:

- Recruit Veterans to work at VA;
- Retain Veterans currently employed at VA;
- Reintegrate VA's military Servicemember employees seamlessly after deployments;
- Recognize and honor military service; and
- Educate VA's supervisors, hiring managers, and human resources professionals and coworkers about Veteran-specific issues and support resources.

VA for Vets is helping VA transform into a high-performing 21st century organization – one that adapts to new realities, leverages new technologies, and serves a changing population of Veterans with renewed commitment. VA wants Veterans to

enjoy their work and build meaningful careers at VA. The overarching mission is simple: create a world-class organization of Veterans serving Veterans by placing them in the right job and providing opportunities for career development.

Conclusion

VA, through local and national partnerships, is implementing the President's hiring initiatives for Veterans and preparing to implement services consistent with the VOW To Hire Heroes Act of 2011 (Public Law 112-56). This law will assist VA and the Department of Labor in providing training opportunities for our Nation's unemployed Veterans. The VR&E services provided by our Cleveland RO employees and VA employees across the Nation are pivotal to the success of these initiatives and implementation of Public Law 112-56, as its sole purpose is to help our Veterans return to fulfilling careers and successfully sustain their jobs. We are actively working with active-duty Servicemembers to provide seamless transition services and increase successful employment. We are developing strong partnerships with businesses in all sectors to identify employment opportunities, particularly with those sectors with a lack of qualified applicants. We are analyzing job trends to strategically help Veterans match their career plans with future job-market demands. And we are very excited about VA's new VA for Vets program to hire and train Veterans to become successfully employed in high-demand jobs in VA, such as nurses and counselors. Our proud staff members work diligently toward the mission of helping Veterans achieve their employment and independent living goals.

Senator Brown and Committee Members, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.