

ROBERT MADDEN, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, NATIONAL ECONOMIC COMMISSION,
THE AMERICAN LEGION

STATEMENT OF
ROBERT MADDEN, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
NATIONAL ECONOMIC COMMISSION
THE AMERICAN LEGION
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE
ON
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE POST-9/11 GI BILL

APRIL 21, 2010

Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Burr and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to present The American Legion's views on the implementation of the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 today. The American Legion commends the Committee for holding a hearing to discuss this very important and timely issue.

American men and women are serving in two wars, while also serving this great nation in various capacities across the globe. For veterans who have served since September 11, 2001; they are entitled to education benefits. Not just any education benefits, but the most comprehensive benefits since the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944. The original WWII benefit is said to have produced 50 years of economic prosperity for America. With over 2 million service members having served since 2001, the Post 9/11 GI Bill can do the same thing for this country and give this new "Greatest Generation" an education.

The American Legion has been a lead supporter of the Post 9/11 GI bill, but has also been a concerned advocate of the implementation. The 111th Congress has held hearings on the long-term and short-term implementation strategies for administration of the Post 9/11 GI Bill by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). These hearings updated Congress on VA's development of the information technology components for the new law and the progress that has been made towards its implementation. The American Legion testified before Congress earlier last year about its concerns regarding VA's implementation strategies and made a recommendation that VA be ready to fulfill its administrative duties 'right the first time' on August 1, 2009.

Since the passage and the implementation of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, VA has had a rough and rocky start. Thinking that they were fully prepared to implement the biggest changes in GI Bill history, VA set out to put their best foot forward in August 2009. What they soon found out was that the system was flawed and that there was no easy way to process a Certificate of Eligibility or an actual claim. A processor for the old Montgomery GI Bill needed only around 30 minutes to process a claim, but for the components of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, that amount ballooned to close to 2 hours per claim. Without the right amount of staff, along with the actual time a claim took

to be processed, this caused VA to present itself with an ever growing backlog of education claims.

Unfortunately, many of these veterans were waiting weeks and months just to get their Certificate of Eligibility, let alone their claim to be processed. These men and women gave up their jobs in order to better their employment chances by going to school. It should be noted, to be able to get the most out of the benefit, a veteran or family member needs take a course load of over half-time. This means that veterans, who recently left the military, were without a job and without their education benefit from VA. The American Legion received hundreds of calls and emails a month to discuss their financial difficulties; even the possibility of becoming homeless. The American Legion responded to a number of these veterans with Temporary Financial Assistance, one of our many programs to assist veterans and their families. America's veterans are relying upon this benefit to get their education to create a stable environment for them and their families.

In turn, VA responded to this issue and made an executive decision to provide individuals, who were in school, an emergency payment of up to \$3,000. The American Legion applauded and still agrees that this was a smart decision to make, but now is seeing the backlash from this decision. Now, there are reports of veterans and their family members losing all of their future payments instead of the proposed \$750.00 reduction VA promised from the payment plan. VA has taken steps to rectify this situation, but some of the damage has already been done. Many veterans and their families called The American Legion because they cannot get through to VA and need information. We take pride in assisting them, but need VA's cooperation to get issues resolved. The American Legion believes there needs to be more oversight on decisions that are made to ensure proper implementation, so that the veteran or his/her family member is not the one who suffers.

Another recurring issue is over payment. There have been reports of schools being overpaid, which is why many of schools are waiting for the add/drop period before sending in the veteran's enrollment certification. In spite of this move by the schools, the veteran is still being overpaid; consequently, the schools send back the money, but it is not being reported back to the VA in a timely manner. Ultimately, the veteran is then denied their housing allowance and books stipend, until their payment is recouped by VA. This causes an undue burden for the veteran and his/her family and causes, again, another financial hardship. Every time a mistake happens, it does not affect VA, but does manage to cause problems for the veteran. Closer oversight on these issues would be the fix to many of these problems.

One of the main challenges VA faces is communication. One Regional Office (RO) says the veteran can do something one way and then another RO says the veteran cannot. Secondly, a veteran or family member will call the 1-800 numbers for education assistance and will ask a question. That same veteran will call back, get a different operator and ask the same question. What the veteran receives, on occasion, is multiple answers. The veteran needs to receive the same answer, so he/she can properly navigate the education process.

The American Legion also would like to bring to the Committee's attention a flaw that exists in the Post 9/11 GI Bill. With all the great benefits the Post 9/11 GI Bill offers, it has unfortunately left out a few educational choices. The American Legion is a strong supporter of allowing the

Post 9/11 GI Bill to be used for non-degree granting institutions. This employment path is a more traditional choice, but vocational, apprenticeship, on-the-job training and flight training are not payable by the current bill (Post 9/11). This disparity has caused much concern for The American Legion. We have found that not every veteran has the time or is considering attending college. They might have a family and need to become gainfully employed as soon as possible, which is something that vocational, on-the-job training, apprenticeship and flight training offer. Instead, a veteran may choose a more traditional path and attend a non-degree institution, but cannot use their Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits to complete these courses. Most of these education paths consist of a shorter training time and can lead to immediate employment. The American Legion believes that veterans should never be limited in the manner they use their educational benefits.

Currently, there are two bills, H.R. 3813 and S. 3171, which are companion measures. These bills propose changes to the Post 9/11 GI Bill to allow veterans to use their educational benefits at non-degree granting institutions. The American Legion supports both of these bills. Veterans should be free to choose their school and get the education they believe is best for them and their family.

Even with some challenges and missteps, The American Legion is a constant supporter of VA and is working with them to ensure that veterans and their families get the necessary assistance during this education transition. The American Legion recently held the “Veterans on Campus” education symposium, which tried to identify best practices on how to assist veterans in their transition from the military to college life. What we found was a large number of student-veterans and academia did not have sufficient information about the Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits. The American Legion believes that VA needs to provide more outreach to colleges and universities around the country to ensure these student-veterans have a full range of knowledge concerning their education benefits.

The VA has taken all the necessary steps in order to provide a fluid transition for veterans and their families. We have seen numerous bumps along the way, but VA has had to make some tough choices, such as the emergency payment, to correct those problems. The American Legion will continue to monitor the continued transition for the Post-9/11 GI Bill and appreciates the opportunity to report on our findings.

The American Legion appreciates the opportunity to present this statement for the record. Again, thank you Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Burr, and Members of the Committee for allowing The American Legion to present its views on this very important issue.