

Peter Meijer, Member, Board of Directors, Student Veterans of America

Mrs. Chairman, Senator Burr, Members of the Committee,

On behalf of Student Veterans of America I would like to express our sincere gratitude at being invited to testify here today. The bills in question represent numerous efforts towards a single goal, a goal that we all share: the establishment of a system that provides the security and protections necessary to ensure successful outcomes for student veterans.

It is clear that these efforts are critical not just for student veterans, but for the American people whose trust and confidence we in the veterans affairs community all hold. The public expects that there will be a system in place to provide for the education of our veterans, that this system will have adequate protections to prevent fraud and abuse, and to ensure that veterans have the information and guidance they need to graduate and lead productive lives.

I will now comment on specific bills and give the committee the input of Student Veterans of America. However, before I do, I would like to mention that out of all veteran service organizations, SVA is the only organization that is solely devoted to helping veterans in higher education. We have over 550 campus-based chapters in the United States and our members are directly impacted by the changes proposed in these bills. Thus, we have considered these bills carefully and are here to give a voice to those who will be impacted directly by the legislation before you today.

With respect to Senate Bill S. 1634,

The power to approve which courses are eligible to be paid for by educational benefits is among the most significant in the entire system set out by the Post-9/11 GI Bill. While SVA is generally in favor of empowering State Approving Agencies (SAA), we have concerns about whether each SAA is capable of being the sole authority on who gets what programs approved and what effect this may have on student veterans who begin their education in one state and seek to transfer credits to another. What is needed at this time is more uniformity and consistency in the system, not less. As a result of that fact, we have reservations concerning this bill and recommend that the VA, at a minimum, set a framework to ensure consistency across various state approving agencies.

With respect to Senate Bill S. 1852,

SVA supports, and has always supported, the Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry scholarship. After ten years of continuous deployment we can no longer continue to understand the military to be comprised only of uniformed service members. Military families have born the hardship and struggle of war alongside the men and women who fight. SVA feels that it is just to consider them eligible for benefits and so supports the proposed expansion. Families are as much a part of the veterans community as those who wore the uniform, and we owe them our support.

With respect to Senate Bill S.2179

SVA supports further integrating the Department of Education standards into the approval process for courses to be eligible for the GI Bill. In general, one of the persistent problems that has remained unsolved in the system is that the VA is neither designed nor established as an agency focused on education policy. Since the implementation of the GI Bill, the VA has tried to become such an agency. SVA feels that this is potentially problematic. The Department of Education is the federal government's agency for matters dealing with education and possesses the institutional competency to evaluate courses. Rather than develop a redundant competency in another agency, SVA feels it is wiser to either defer to the capabilities that already exist within DOE or the VA form a joint committee with DOE to address such issues.

In addition, SVA supports the use of GI Bill funds to provide training that leads to meaningful employment, but as with degree programs the focus of requirements for eligibility ought to be on outcome, not potential. Any program that claims to prepare veterans for employment must be required to show proof to back up these claims, and SVA supports provisions to codify such requirements.

With respect to Senate Bill S.2206,

SVA strongly supports efforts to provide educational counseling to veterans before receiving such assistance. At present, much of the educational counseling veterans receive comes from educational institutions whose position is not necessarily objective. Knowledge of pertinent institutional characteristics such as median student loan debt, cohort default rate, degree completion at regular, 150, and 200 percent intervals, accreditation status, and post-graduation employment will help prospective student veterans make informed decisions regarding their education. In addition, the establishment of a complaint-tracking system will serve to hold schools better accountable and correct practices that may not serve in the best interest of veterans. For these reasons, we support this provision.

With respect to Senate Bill S.2241,

SVA believes that this legislation will prepare veterans to make informed decisions regarding their education. As the short title suggests, consumer awareness is needed for veterans as they pursue training and educational opportunities. SVA strongly supports any provisions that increase protections for student veterans from institutions that engage in, or are likely to engage in, predatory practices. At the heart of much of the turmoil in the system right now is the practice of paying recruiters per student, creating inappropriate incentives for companies to orient themselves internally towards getting veterans in the door instead of preparing them for their future. SVA believes it is wise for the congress to intercede in this matter to orient the market towards results for veterans instead of results for companies. As a result, we support these provisions.

I stand ready to answer any additional questions concerning our stance on the aforementioned legislation. Thank you for your time.