

The Honorable Conrad R. Burns, United States Senator

Senator Conrad Burns

Chairman Craig, Ranking Member Akaka, members of the committee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak today about legislation which is very important to me ? the Veterans' Employment and Training Act of 2006.

As you know, I had the privilege of serving as a United States Marine. That service instilled in me a great respect for the men and women who serve in our military. The sacrifices made by our brave men and women could never be overstated, particular in these turbulent times.

Sadly, many of these individuals are faced with great hardship when they leave the service. For too many young servicemen and women, the transition to civilian life proves extremely difficult, particularly for veterans between the ages of 18 and 24. For Veterans age 20-24, unemployment currently stands at 10.2%, this is down slightly, but still higher than the unemployment rate for non-veterans in the same age group. And for Veterans 18-19 it is a disturbing 26.4% -- nearly double the unemployment rate of non-veterans in the same age group. This is simply unacceptable!

To help rectify this situation, we introduced S. 2416, the Veterans' Employment and Training (VET) Act of 2006.

Under the Montgomery G.I. Bill, the Veterans' Administration currently provides accelerated benefits to assist our service men and women in transitioning to the civilian job market. Through this program, the VA makes short-term, high-cost training programs more attractive to veterans by paying benefits in a lump sum and by covering up to 60% of the cost of some educational programs. However, this program is now only available to men and women who seek training in high-tech programs.

In order to provide this benefit to more of our brave men and women in the armed forces, the VET Act will expand eligibility for accelerated benefits to include industry sectors identified by the Department of Labor as likely to add large numbers of new jobs or require new job training skills in the coming years. These sectors include construction, hospitality, retail, financial services, energy, homeland security, health care, and transportation.

A number of these sectors face critical shortages of employees now or in the near future and want to attract veterans to their professions. For instance, in my state of Montana, we are currently facing a shortage of trained construction workers and truck drivers. And nationally, the trucking industry needs an additional 20,000 drivers today and expects to face a driver shortage of 110,000 drivers by 2014. The modest change that we are proposing today will help to provide needed workers to these and other industries.

To give you an idea how this will benefit veterans, take the example of a truck driver training program at one of the schools in Montana. This program, standard for most driver training programs, lasts 4 to 5 weeks and costs \$4,000. Unfortunately, many Veterans are unable to afford this training, even with the \$1,034 in G.I. Bill benefits that they may currently receive for

this training. However, under the revised accelerated benefits program called for in the VET Act, that same Veteran would be eligible for 60% or \$2,400 of the costs of the training.

We have an obligation to make sure that these individuals are not forgotten when they return from service. One step we can take now is to ensure that those who serve have access to every educational opportunity possible. By expanding eligibility for accelerated G.I. Bill benefits, we will give many of these veterans a new opportunity to get training and find work in some of the fastest growing sectors of our economy

This will keep our country moving on the right track and open up more opportunities for our men and women in uniform.

We owe it to these brave individuals to act quickly to provide them with this expanded benefit. Thank you once again for providing me with this opportunity to speak on this bill.

Senator Burns served in the United States Marine Corps from 1955-1957.