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TESTIMONY OF
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BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE

LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON THE TOPIC OF:
"PENDING HEALTH CARE AND BENEFITS LEGISLATION"

NOVEMBER 18, 2015



Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal and members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit our testimony on “pending health care and benefits legislation.” With over 1,200 chapters across the country, we are pleased to share the perspective of those most directly impacted by this subject with this committee.

Established in 2008, SVA has grown to become a force and voice for the interests of veterans in higher education. With a myriad of programs supporting their success, rigorous research development seeking ways to improve the landscape, and advocacy throughout the nation, we place the student veteran at the top of our organizational pyramid. As the future leaders of this country, nothing is more paramount than their success in school to prepare them for productive and impactful lives.

We will discuss opportunities with the vocational rehabilitation services, the need for increased pathways for medical professionals at VA, and the importance of reinstating benefits for those impacted by school closures. Two proposals on the agenda are outside of the scope of SVA, though we support the intent of each: S. 2170, “*a bill to improve the ability of health care professionals to treat veterans through the uses of telemedicine, and for other purposes*”; and, the “*Veterans Affairs Retaliation Prevention Act of 2015*”.

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S. 2106, “a bill to require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to develop and publish an action plan for improving the vocational rehabilitation services and assistance provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes”

At a meeting between student veterans at a New York university and the Secretary of VA, Bob McDonald, one fact was readily apparent: not enough veterans know about vocational rehabilitation and employment (VR&E) program opportunities. We believe this is the fundamental challenge facing the VR&E program today. We support the intent of S. 2106, however we encourage VA to address the components of the bill without the requirement of legislation. VA has openly made it clear that they seek to serve their customers, our nation’s veterans, to the fullest extent possible. As such, we believe this would be a timely opportunity for VA to demonstrate action on a valuable program, which we believe is critical to those transitioning from their time in service.

The components of S. 2106 touch on several areas that we see as necessary in addressing the success of the VR&E program. First, in our testimony to the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity on October 22, 2015, we identified the need for reduced caseloads on VR&E counselors.¹ Inclusion of element one would address an issue that is consistent with the comments from our members. As a minor note, we would strike “disorder” from line 19 in section two, and refer to the particular issue instead as post-traumatic stress; we note that inclusion of “disorder” is an improper characterization of

¹ Congressional Testimony, House Veteran’s Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, October 22, 2015, <https://veterans.house.gov/witness-testimony/mr-william-hubbard-2>



that challenge. Element two gets to the heart of the challenge with the VR&E program, and we appreciate the thoughtful inclusion of this point. Element three is a supporting component of the previous element, and we similarly applaud its inclusion. Finally, element four is one issue we would like to see VA address as a priority of any action plan. It is our understanding that VA provides training opportunities for VR&E counselors. However, it would be important to publish the type and extent of that training so public comment could be shared for potential improvements.

In general, it has become increasingly clear that the consistency of program delivery and awareness of the VR&E opportunities are points for immediate consideration. We applaud VA for their commitment to delivering a program with high impact and strong return on investment. We recognize the challenge of funding in supporting the VR&E work, a high-touch and resource-intensive program. We look forward to working closely with VA and this committee on implementing common sense solutions to influence the impact and delivery of this program.

S. 2134, “Physician Assistant Employment and Education Act of 2015”

VA is charged with providing benefits and medical care for those citizens who served our nation and bore her battles. While the specific medical treatments and procedures have changed since its establishment, VA’s commitment to care for our nation’s veterans has not wavered. Despite this commitment, fundamental problems such as inadequate staffing, extended wait times, and lack of accessibility have plagued the system over the past 30 years. The unfortunate circumstances leading to the investigation and resignation of senior officials at the Phoenix, Arizona, Veterans Health Administration facility further has exasperated an already exhausted and problematic system of abuse and neglect.

On September 8, 2014, Sec. McDonald testified before the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee that the VA medical system is in need of more than 28,000 medical professionals to address the staffing shortage. “I am worried about our ability to recruit and retain talent,” Secretary McDonald said at his first news conference at the department’s office in Washington, D.C. We are highly supportive of S. 2134, and believe it would establish a model for broader VA hiring initiatives needed to address the on-going gap of medical professional talent at VA.

Aligning Priorities

VA has stated that its top three priorities for the coming months include the following: rebuilding trust, improving service delivery, and setting a course for long-term excellence. Congress appropriated \$16.3B to address the significant challenges facing the VA; \$5B is directly targeted to hire trained and qualified medical professionals. The size of this investment provides the VA with a historic opportunity to shape not just the present, but the future of the entire VA.

In 2012, there were approximately one million veterans using GI Bill benefits through data captured by the *Million Records Project*. It is projected that slightly more than half of those Veterans (about 520,000) will complete an undergraduate/graduate degree program over the next five years. Of the 520,000 graduates, roughly ten percent are projected to earn a degree in a health-related or social work career field. The result is an estimated 52,000 veterans trained and qualified to work in medical professions across the country in the next five years. If that time frame is extended to seven years to accommodate a track for medical school,



current research projects a population of over 75,000 medical professionals trained through Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits.² As such, we know the talent exists within the system, and we hope VA makes the most of this opportunity.

The Scope of the Challenge

Unfortunately, the current human resources model relies exclusively on advertisement-heavy recruitment architecture. If minimum credentialing standards are met, specific conditions are present for the applicant, the applicant provides the proper information when applying, and interview questions are answered to satisfaction, a vacancy is filled. Unfortunately, that process is inefficient and breeds a culture of practitioners whose narrow interest is to avoid being unemployed.

VA lacks a national pipeline that identifies universities with high-demand professional training programs with large numbers of prior military enrolled in those programs, and a streamlined talent management system. With more than 75,000 veterans expected to pursue health-related fields, we believe VA could capitalize on this talent pool, but are not currently positioned to do so.

A Unique Solution

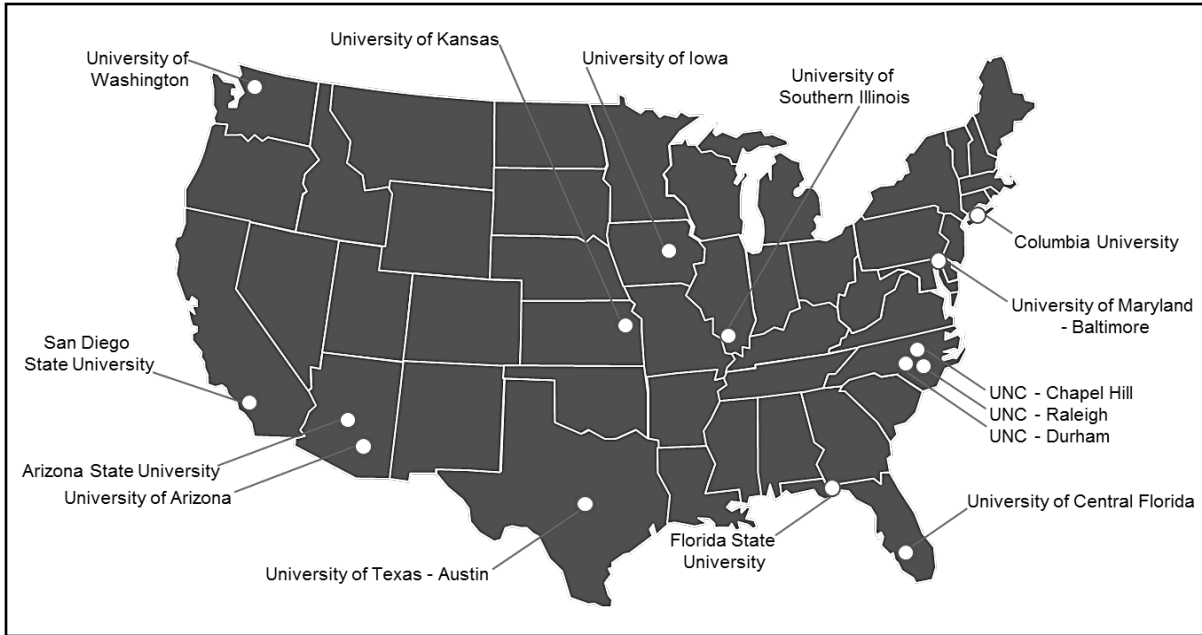
This legislation presents an opportunity which may lead to additional hiring programs. As the first initiative, the legislation addresses a critical gap in physician assistants (PAs). In addition to the work of the VA in response to this potential proposal, we believe that education and veterans non-profits are in a unique position to deliver a long-term solution to the challenge of recruiting medical professionals. Advocacy on behalf of veterans affords SVA a unique capability to address the immediate shortages and project fills for the future in conjunction with VA.

As part of this solution, program partners would be in a position to help recruit, screen and support no less than 250 student veterans who are currently pursuing their degree in one of six critical job fields identified by VA. These job fields include the following: M.D.'s (emphasis on general practitioners), R.N.'s, Psychiatrists, Psychologists, MSW's, Medical Technologists, and Health Administrators.

Based on this legislation's criteria, we have identified 15 schools highlighted by location across the country as detailed in Figure 1 below. When evaluating the existence of priority medical programs, schools were scored for their number of offerings in the following disciplines: medicine (general practitioner emphasis), nursing, psychology, psychiatry, medical technology, social work (MSW), and health administration. In addition to this first 15, we have researched an additional 15 schools we also feel would be worth considering, and would look forward to working with this committee to consider the attributes of each school.

Figure 1. Potential Schools by Location

² Cate, Chris. *Million Records Project*, March 2014, http://studentveterans.org/images/Reingold_Materials/mrp/download-materials/mrp_Full_report.pdf





Additional Considerations

In addition to the work with PAs, residency opportunities will be imperative to long term VA employment. A clearly defined path to education and employment coupled with previously mentioned benefits will create a trajectory towards health careers and VA employment for student veterans currently in or separating from the Department of Defense (DoD). The VA assisting in the branding and promotion of this program through their various public relation channels will maximize the audience and rates of success.

One problem identified by current research is the lack of trust in the current VA health care system. We believe the system has an absence of much needed medical professionals who are themselves, veterans. In addition, this proposal leverages a significant cost-savings to taxpayers by harnessing the existing benefits that veterans receive through their military service in the form of the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

VA has shown significant improvement under the leadership of Sec. McDonald. We continue to hear from those within the VA system that they have positive experiences and appreciate the work of VA employees. Indeed, Sec. McDonald's emphasis on the customer experience, including the rollout of *MyVA*, demonstrates that the department is headed in the right direction. Despite these leaps in improved service, we believe there is more to be done, which VA has also publicly shared.

In recognizing current programs that VA operates, we would like to highlight the following opportunities: the Health Professional Scholarship Program (HPSP), Veterans Affairs Learning Opportunity Residency (VALOR), Graduate Healthcare Administrative Training Program (GHATP), Visual Impairment and Orientation and Mobility Professionals Scholarship Program (VIOMPSP).³ These are existing programs which would be complimentary to this legislation, and we encourage this committee to explore these as additional avenues to expand this legislation.

Ultimately, this is a gap that has to be filled; it may be costly, but it's both necessary and beneficial for the long-term sustainability of our nation's overall health care system. The Senate Veterans Affairs Committee and this legislation will be pivotal in that effort, and we stand ready to support that work if we should be called upon.

S. __, "a bill to provide veterans impacted by school closures certain relief and restoration of education benefits"

Last year, we quickly learned of the insolvency of Corinthian Colleges, Inc. (CCi) institutions of higher learning (IHL). As we reached out to CCi leaders to address the situation, we received no response, despite concerted attempts to meet with their representatives; for us, it was a critical time, as more than 8,800 student veterans were within their system. Since then, we have been actively seeking to remedy the situation, and to protect the interests of those student veterans directly impacted in the situation. We are

³ HPSP: <http://www.va.gov/vaforms/medical/pdf/vha-10-0491f-fill.pdf>; VALOR: <http://mycareeratva.va.gov/library/internships/veterans-affairs-learning-opportunity-residency-valor>; GHATP: <http://www.vacareers.va.gov/assets/common/print/GHATP-Info-Flyer.pdf>; VIOMPSP: <http://www.va.gov/vaforms/medical/pdf/vha-10-0491L-fill.pdf>



pleased to see this legislation, and continue to seek the support of members of this committee for the proposal.

When we learned of the closures, our first reaction was to find out how we could support the student veterans immediately impacted by IHL closures, and we also considered the future to see what can be done to prevent such from reoccurring. We believe it's important that VA recovers Post-9/11 GI Bill dollars spent on reckless programs where students are either passively or aggressively misled. The Department of Education announcement regarding the closures provides precedent for this authority to be granted to VA.^{4, 5} For student veterans who lost valuable time due to closures or misrepresentation, they should be able to regain the benefits they earned. In initial conversations with VA, it was clear that even though restoring these benefits was right, the VA lacked the proper authority to justify such action.

Most importantly, we believe it's a matter of maximizing the economic impact of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. For students who lose benefits to weak schools, the investment in those student veterans is squandered. Thousands of student veterans were left wondering what would happen to them when their schools ceased to exist last summer; we can't allow even one more student veteran to face such a bleak prospect. We also note that while this proposal addresses situations which have already occurred, we continue to encourage potential student veterans to ask the right questions so they can avoid potential traps in the future.

We fully stand in support of this legislation which would restore entitlement for individuals who pursued a program of education with VA educational assistance and failed to receive credit, or lost training time, toward completion of the veteran's educational, professional, or vocational objective due to IHL closures. We are pleased to see that this proposal would continue monthly educational assistance payments, including housing allowances, through the end of the term, quarter, or semester in which the school closes, or up to four months from the date of the school closure while not charging any of the veteran's entitlement.

Unfortunately, we believe that we haven't seen the last of school closures. The higher education industry deserves a hard look at its practices and how they deliver education to non-traditional students—the growing education audience. As more schools with faulty practices and insolvent structures close, we should be prepared to offer them solutions. We believe this committee and its House counterpart are positioned to lead the way on behalf of student veterans for all non-traditional students.

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⁴ Department of Education, Debt Relief for Corinthian Colleges Students, June 8, 2015, <http://blog.ed.gov/2015/06/debt-relief-for-corinthian-colleges-students/>

⁵ Federal Student Aid, *Loan Forgiveness Programs*, <http://blog.ed.gov/2015/06/debt-relief-for-corinthian-colleges-students/>



We thank the Chairman, Ranking Member, and the Committee members for your time, attention, and devotion to the cause of veterans in higher education. As always, we welcome your feedback and questions, and we look forward to continuing to work with this committee, the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, and the entire Congress to ensure the success of all generations of veterans through education.



Information Required by Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, SVA has not received any federal grants in Fiscal Year 2015, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.



William Hubbard, Vice President of Government Affairs



Will Hubbard is on the professional staff of Student Veterans of America, currently serving as their Vice President of Government Affairs. His focus is on legislative action and executive branch policy across all issues that impact student veterans in higher education.

Mr. Hubbard is frequently called before congress as a subject matter expert to testify on a variety of issues, and often advises executive officials in the administration on higher education and veterans policy issues.

Previously, he was a National Executive Committee Member of Deloitte's Armed Forces Business Resource Group, and led the successful proposal of several veteran-focused projects while serving in the federal practice as part of Deloitte's Strategy and Operations business line.

Mr. Hubbard entered the Marine Corps in 2006, and initially served with 2nd Battalion, 24th Marines. He later went on to lead Marines with 4th Supply Company at Boling Air Force Base in Washington, DC. Today, he continues to serve in the Marine Corps Reserves based out of MCB Quantico, VA.

He has been a leader with Student Veterans of America at both the chapter and national levels, and has been passionate about veterans health issues since entering the armed services. Mr. Hubbard is a graduate of American University, where he studied International Relations. He currently resides in Arlington, VA with his wife and long-haired dachshund.