

Inhofe Statement for the Record on the Veterans Education Improvement Act

Today I would like to state my support for Senate bill 1356, the Veterans Education Improvement Act of 2017, which I introduced along with Senator Cornyn on June 14, 2017.

In 2010, Congress passed the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Improvements Act. This act authorized veterans to use their hard earned educational benefits to pursue a technical or career certificate program as an option instead of the traditional liberal arts opportunities at a college or university.

Career technology centers, or CTEs, are public, non-profit, non-degree granting institutions that provide skills and certificates important to every community and are found in over ten states. CTEs are renowned for providing job training for technical careers like welding, mechanics, and cosmetology. Here our veterans will be able to obtain necessary skills that our U.S. workforce desperately needs.

The goal of this bill is to give veterans enrolled at postsecondary CTE institutions expanded access to innovative education programs that utilize technology and online learning opportunities.

The city of Enid, Oklahoma has been home to the Autry Technology Center since 1967 and serves over 10,000 people annually through programs and services that enhance skills and employment opportunities.

Autry currently offers 26 full-time career programs from air conditioning to culinary arts, to radiography, to welding, and several other critical, applied skills used nationwide.

Public, non-profit centers in the Oklahoma Career-Tech system, like Autry Technology Center in Enid, are proven to significantly contribute to the economic development and quality of life in Oklahoma, especially our returning veterans.

Career and technical education centers are vital as a post-secondary education option and workforce training system for our veterans, but, under the Obama administration, the VA took action to block certain tech center benefits from our vets. Since March of 2016, the VA has not allowed the Post-9/11 GI Bill to pay for any form of independent study from a non-degree producing institution, including CTEs. In many cases, this hindrance precludes veterans from utilizing these courses or pursuing these certificate programs.

CTEs, much like their college and university counterparts, are utilizing internet based courses as a component of their programs to provide flexibility for working adults and veterans to better accommodate their lifestyles and encourage learning.

Marcie Mack, the State Director of the Oklahoma Career-Tech system, told me last week that, "Oklahoma's Career-Tech system is committed to serving U.S. military veterans; however, with current federal policy there are obstacles for our veterans to be able to participate in Oklahoma's Career-Tech system and receive their benefits."

To address the current policy issues, I have introduced S. 1356 along with Senator Cornyn, clarifying the law to ensure *accredited* CTE programs can continue to receive GI Bill benefits even if a portion of the program is done by independent study. This language, from section 5 of the discussion draft, is supported by Student Veterans of America, the American Legion, and the United States Department of Veterans Affairs.

In the time since I have been working on this legislation, I have heard concerns from this committee about whether this would open the door for bad actors in the education space to take advantage of these benefits.

My staff, along with the staff of this Committee, have explored these concerns and have made modifications to the language to ensure the bill does not have negative, unintended consequences. While many non-degree programs at area CTE centers are already accredited and eligible for other federal financial aid programs outside of the Post-9/11 GI bill, this bill has an additional quality control measure of limiting access to only programs that are accredited by a recognized accrediting body – which is the standard across higher education. I am committed to ensuring positive outcomes for veterans who enroll in these programs. It is my hope that the Committee will quickly consider this legislation so that veterans in Oklahoma and across the nation can achieve career success after leaving the service.

I deeply appreciate the attention the Committee has given to my bill, and I look forward to continuing my work with you to ensure this issue is addressed.