

A REVIEW OF VA'S VETSUCCESS ON CAMPUS PROGRAM

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED FOURTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 22, 2015

Serial No. 114-40

Printed for the use of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs



Available via the World Wide Web: <http://www.fdsys.gov>

U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING OFFICE

98-695

WASHINGTON : 2016

For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Publishing Office
Internet: bookstore.gpo.gov Phone: toll free (866) 512-1800; DC area (202) 512-1800
Fax: (202) 512-2104 Mail: Stop IDCC, Washington, DC 20402-0001

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A REVIEW OF VA'S VETSUCCESS ON CAMPUS PROGRAM

Thursday, October 22, 2015

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY,
Washington, D.C.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:00 p.m. in Room 334, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Brad Wenstrup [chairman of the subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Wenstrup, Takano, and Bost.

OPENING STATEMENT OF BRAD WENSTRUP

Dr. WENSTRUP. Well, good afternoon, everyone. I want to welcome you all to the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity's hearing today entitled, "A Review of VA's VetSuccess On Campus Program."

The VetSuccess On Campus Program is administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program. VetSuccess On Campus began as a pilot program in 2009 at the University of South Florida, who is with us today, and has since expanded to 94 campuses across the country.

The program is in place to provide veterans, service members and their dependents with assistance and counseling as they are utilizing their GI Bill or attending school through Voc Rehab. VSOC is an additional resource for veterans and service members as they transition from active duty to student life, and further assists them as they work towards meaningful employment following their military careers.

Each school with a VSOC program has a Voc Rehab counselor in place to assist the students attending that school. While I do believe it is important that our student veterans have qualified individuals assisting them throughout their college careers, I have said before that I do have some concerns with these master's-level counselors being at each VSOC location.

As we discussed earlier this year at our Oversight hearing on Voc Rehab, VR&E counselors are still experiencing high caseloads, yet more counselors aren't being requested by this administration to alleviate these weighing numbers.

A master's-level counselor may not be necessary at every VSOC location, but could be utilized elsewhere to bring down some of the caseloads. This doesn't mean that VA shouldn't have a representative at these schools, I am just not sure if the current counselors

are the best options. I hope that our witnesses here today are able to touch on these concerns and how we can potentially utilize the VSOC counselors to also assist in VR&E caseloads nationally.

I do look forward to discussing the VSOC program's success and outcome measurements at its current university locations. Just as is the case with Voc Rehab, it is hard to fully grasp and track the outcomes of veterans who utilize the VetSuccess On Campus program. However, since the program was started by VA as a pilot program and is not something that is in statute, I think it is important for the program's future that we take a thorough look at outcomes and how our student veterans are benefitting from the program that is provided while they are attending school. Having these discussions is important if we decide to make VSOC permanent for future generations of veterans.

I am pleased today that in addition to our other witnesses, we have two schools, that have VSOC programs on their campuses. With us is the University of South Florida, which as I mentioned is where VSOC was first piloted in 2009, and we have the University of Cincinnati, who also have a thriving program for their student veterans. It is important that we hear their perspectives of this program and the impact the presence of this program has on their campuses, as well as their interactions with VA. I believe this is also an opportunity to understand their best practices, and how they share those practices with other schools and student veterans nationwide.

Although I do have concerns, as I have already mentioned, with the utilization at all 94 locations of master's-level Voc Rehab counselors, I do believe that this program can be an immense resource for our veterans and their families as they transition from military life to, not only civilian life, but to the life of a college student. It is not always an easy path to maneuver and I believe that this hearing is an important opportunity for the subcommittee and our witnesses to focus on enriching and expanding this resource even more.

With that, I recognize the Ranking Member, Mr. Takano, for his remarks.

OPENING STATEMENT OF RANKING MEMBER MARK TAKANO

Mr. TAKANO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I appreciate the opportunity for the subcommittee to take a close look at the VetSuccess On Campus program today.

As you know, the VSOC program provides an on-campus resource for veterans, service members, and qualified dependents to receive support for any issue or concern that might interfere with a student's goal of persisting through to graduation. Obstacles could include VA benefit issues, questions about where to go for mental health counseling, concerns about financial or legal issues, or job market information.

We know from many studies that successful transition from active duty to civilian life requires significant planning and support from the military and the VA. Transitioning from active duty to campus life can be even more daunting, especially for first-generation college students. Add the burdens of injury or PTS, and it is

not hard to imagine why graduation levels are not as high as we would like them to be for veterans using their GI Bill benefits.

Now, this is where the VSOC counselor comes in, however. They are easily accessible on campus, so problems are resolved as quickly and as easily as possible. I am hoping VA will provide us with concrete data on VSOC outcomes today. I want to hear evidence that the program provides clear, quantifiable benefits to student veterans, data that will increase the likelihood that we can expand this successful program.

I also know that the VSOs support this program and were instrumental in creating it. If they have recommendations for how the VSOC program can be improved now that has existed for almost six years, I want to hear what they have to say.

I thank the witnesses for being here today, and I look forward to the opportunity to hear your views and ask questions.

Thank you, Chairman Wenstrup, and I yield back.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Well, I thank the ranking member.

And I now invite our first and only panel to the table. I do want to thank our witnesses for understanding that we had to combine panels today due to scheduling issues, but I appreciate you being here and I view your testimony as very important.

I want to welcome back my friend Mr. Terence Harrison, who is the Manager for Veterans Programs and Services at the University of Cincinnati. I also want to welcome Dr. Lawrence A. Braue, who is the Director for the Office of Veterans Services at the University of Florida; Mr. Will Hubbard, Vice President of Government Affairs for Student Veterans of America; Mr. Ryan Kaufman, who is the Nebraska Veteran Team Leader for the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America; and Mr. Jack Kammerer, the Director of the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Services at VA.

All of your complete written statements will be made part of the hearing record and each of you will be recognized for five minutes for your oral statement.

So let's begin with you, Mr. Harrison. You are now recognized for five minutes.

STATEMENT OF TERENCE HARRISON

Mr. HARRISON. Thank you. I would like to thank you, Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano, and members of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity for inviting me to participate in today's hearing on the Department of Veterans Affairs' VetSuccess On Campus program.

Once again, my name is Terence Harrison, I am the Manager of Veterans Programs and Services at the University of Cincinnati.

The University of Cincinnati, or UC, is a public research university enrolling more than 44,000 undergraduate and graduate students in 2014. Our campus is made up of students from all 50 states and over a hundred countries from around the world.

Recognized as a military-friendly school, UC is both a leader and champion in military and veteran-related issues. Currently, UC enrolls about 2,392 military-affiliated students, including active duty military, members of the National Guard or Reserves, and veterans and family members. Of this, 1,016 students are using GI Bill benefits. With the anticipated draw-down of active-duty personnel, the

University of Cincinnati has positioned itself to accommodate these students. The UC adheres closely to the VA's principles of excellence in providing a high-quality educational experience tailored to the unique needs of our veteran students.

The University of Cincinnati continues to hold a positive view of the VetSuccess On Campus or VSOC program. UC is home to one of three VSOC programs in the State of Ohio, with the other two being Ohio State and Cleveland State Universities. The VSOC program aims to assist veterans and service members, as well as their dependents, as they transition from active duty to post-secondary education.

Through the VSOC program, a VA Vocational Rehab counselor is assigned to UC to support veterans and assist with any problems that may arise that may interfere with the education of a student veteran. At UC, student veterans regularly reach out to VSOC for assistance on a range of matters, including expediting and resolving issues of VA educational benefits, looking up pending VA payments and when they can expect to receive them, explaining VA payments clearly, assisting in applying for education, healthcare and other VA benefits, questions about their remaining benefits, and understanding and resolving VA debt.

VSOC is a valuable resource for our student veterans and assures that they will receive expedient service from the VA while they attend UC. Our VSOC counselor has been with the VA for over nine years and has been helpful in establishing a successful VSOC program at UC.

The UC's partnership with VSOC began in September of 2013. At UC, VSOC is housed within the same room or building as the Veterans Programs Services Office to meet the needs of student veterans and to provide a cross-functional team approach to resolving challenges that our veterans face. Housing the VSOC office and our VSOC counselor on campus allows UC to coordinate with the VA.

VSOC conducts additional outreach activities, including employment workshops focusing on translating military schools into a civilian resume, recognizing post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury symptoms, new student orientation, town hall meetings, job fair, and health fairs in collaboration with VA Medical Centers.

In addition, the VSOC University is—of Cincinnati is also a Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership or a VITAL location. VSOC and VITAL together have developed a streamlined approach to assisting veterans with VA Medical Center needs. This approach provides UC's veterans with expedited VA Medical Center service coordination at the Cincinnati VA Medical Center.

In order to best meet the needs and improve the services for our student veterans, we believe that it is important to expand the VSOC to additional schools. For smaller schools that do not have a VSOC, we suggest that VSOC work with a number of schools in a geographical area. For example, in Southwest Ohio, one counselor could oversee Xavier University, Cincinnati State Technical and Community College, and Mount St. Joseph University. The caseload of these counselors could be comparable to the caseload at

larger schools and give the student veterans at these institutions the support that they need.

As for improved coordination between universities and the VA, we have found that housing our VSOC counselor on campus has allowed UC and the VA to easily collaborate, which is beneficial to our student veterans.

In closing, I'd like to thank you again for allowing me to discuss the VSOC program and to share the great work that the University of Cincinnati is doing to accommodate our student veterans. I look forward to working with you as you expand services for student veterans and again offer the University of Cincinnati as an example to inform policy and to guide schools in shaping their programs.

And I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF TERENCE HARRISON APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Dr. WENSTRUP. Thank you, Mr. Harrison.

Colonel Braue, you're now recognized for five minutes.

STATEMENT OF LAWRENCE A. BRAUE, LTC (USA, RET.)

Lieutenant Colonel BRAUE. Thank you, Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano. On behalf of the University of South Florida, thank you for holding today's hearing and allowing us to share our experience with the VetSuccess On Campus program and its impact that it makes on our campus every day.

By way of background, the University of South Florida is a high-impact global research university dedicated to student success. It is the eighth-largest university in the U.S. and serves over 48,000 students. In addition, over 2,000 veterans and their families are enrolled as students at USF. USF was ranked by Military Times "Best for Vets" Magazine as the fifth-best college for veterans. Under the leadership of President Judy Genshaft, the University of South Florida has become a national leader in serving student veterans.

In 2009, the University of South Florida became the first institution of higher learning to participate in the Department of Veterans Affairs' VetSuccess On Campus program. Ms. Janine Frederick is our current VSOC counselor and has served in this role since June of 2010.

Ms. Frederick quickly became an integral part of the Office of Veterans Services' team and an effective liaison between USF and the VA. Ms. Frederick is an amazing counselor and has made the program a complete success on our campus.

Having the VSOC counselor available to veterans on a daily basis has vastly improved the university's ability to meet the needs of our students. In addition, it has greatly increased the confidence that our student veterans have in the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Through the VetSuccess On Campus, our counselor has developed an extremely effective outreach program that dramatically increased the awareness of VA programs and benefits available to student veterans. This calendar year, Ms. Frederick has helped over 300 veterans individually and reached over 750 students through various campus outreach events. She is frequently called upon to advocate for veterans with faculty members who do not un-

derstand the challenges our disabled veterans face in the classroom.

In the fall of 2013, Ms. Frederick initiated a highly successful vet-to-vet tutoring program where academically successful VA work study veterans would provide one-to-one tutoring for other student veterans. Since this program started in the fall of 2013, over 165 students have received individualized tutoring services at no cost to the veteran.

The VetSuccess On Campus program has not been without challenges for the University of South Florida. It's important that I clarify that I can only speak for the University of South Florida and what we have experienced.

The VetSuccess On Campus program is influenced by two separate offices with the Vocational Rehabilitation Education arm of the VA. Oftentimes those two offices provide our VSOC counselor with competing or conflicting guidance. Because the regional office has a very limited understanding of VSOC and is not involved in the day-to-day operation of the program, it makes it very difficult for them to provide effective supervision for the VSOC counselor.

Over time, the VetSuccess On Campus program's purpose and goals have changed without some collaborative effort with the university. For example, recently the VR&E office assigned a Chapter 31 caseload of 50 to our VSOC counselor. This is approximately one third of a Chapter 31 caseload for a full-time VR&E counselor. This is a significant change which alters the way the VSOC functions on our campus. This change is also inconsistent with the memorandum of understanding between USF and the VA, which creates hardship for the VSOC counselor and the school. This effectively reduces her ability to have a positive impact on the academic and lifelong success of the total veteran population on campus.

In order to maximize the effectiveness of our partnership, the university should be a part of the program development and decision-making process. I believe with a few structural and leadership modifications this program could greatly enhance retention and graduation rates for students using the post-9/11 GI Bill.

My recommendations would be to simplify the reporting structure for the VetSuccess On Campus program by creating one office that would oversee the program and the VSOC counselors, and ensure that the VSOC counselors do not receive direction and guidance from multiple sources, establish and maintain consistent, meaningful dialogue between the VA and the university, ensuring that the university has a voice in the program development and decision-making process.

I also believe it is critical that the VA include colleges and universities in the plan to develop success metrics for graduation and retention of veterans using the GI Bill.

Again, I want to thank the committee for allowing the University of South Florida to share our experiences with the VetSuccess On Campus program. It is an honor and a privilege to have this amazing program on our campus. I hope that we can build upon the successes of the program and make the adjustments necessary to make the program even stronger for our future student veterans.

Thank you very much.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF LAWRENCE A. BRAUE APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Dr. WENSTRUP. Why, thank you, Dr. Braue.

Mr. Hubbard, welcome back. You are now recognized for five minutes.

STATEMENT OF WILLIAM HUBBARD

Mr. HUBBARD. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America to submit our testimony on the Department of Veterans Affairs' VetSuccess On Campus program. With over 1200 chapters across the country, we are pleased to share the perspective of those most directly impacted by the 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 this opportunity to address the VSOC program, we will discuss the program's success, areas for improvement, and the related issue of post-9/11 GI Bill processing challenges that we saw this fall.

For student veterans at 94 campuses across the country, they have the benefit of a VetSuccess On Campus program. The VSOC program entails the campus having a VSOC counselor or full-time VA detailee right on campus. We are highly supportive of this program's intent, which we believe to be quite complementary with our own mission.

When serving over 30 student veterans from 12 schools that participate in the VSOC program, the response was overwhelmingly positive. More than 85 percent of stakeholders, including SVA chapter presidents, chapter members and chapter advisers rate VSOC as a seven out of ten or higher on a one-to-ten scale. Additionally, three out of five respondents say they rate their program as a nine or a ten.

One student veteran shared, "We have a VSOC counselor from the VA come to the school twice a month so vets can start a new claim or ask questions concerning a claim. This helps immensely, as the VA hospital is a 35-minute drive from school and keeps our vets on campus. Vets can ask our counselor any type of question concerning their benefits. They also have a Voc Rehab counselor for a few of the vets on campus. We are incredibly lucky to have this program on campus."

In addition to the general support provided by the VSOC counselors, student veterans noted the ability of counselors to quickly correct both process certification and as a major benefit on their campus. They often appreciate the connection counselors make with the school administration as well.

We believe the VSOC program is highly beneficial to student veterans and would like to see it expanded, as resources allow.

While the feedback we received was almost uniformly positive, in fact, when asked what they would change many student veterans replied, "Nothing," we have identified several opportunities for improvement of the program.

The three most common improvements included awareness of the program, expanding to more campuses, and increasing additional personnel support for the program. We believe it would also be

worth considering the criteria of a VSOC campus, as a school with 800 or more veterans is likely to have reasonable resources at this time. Schools with fewer than 800 veterans or greater may have a higher return on investment. To keep costs down, as my colleague pointed out earlier, grouping demographically close IHLs would be something worth thinking about.

Turning to GI Bill processing issues, this fall semester highlighted several challenges that directly impacted student veterans. In early September, significant delays in the processing of GI Bill benefits became an obvious concern. Ultimately, the core challenges of VA's reliance on overtime hours for full-time employees during the peak periods of fall and spring enrollment continue to be an issue.

Under a unique solution with the National Student Clearinghouse, VA and taxpayers incur no additional costs since the schools selected send the data through NSC, paying for the cost of the service, while VA benefits from the streamlined data submissions and research capabilities in conjunction with ed. data are resulting, this all with the added benefit of real-time measurement of completions and program efficacy, and we're happy to discuss that concept in further detail.

We thank the committee for this opportunity to testify on these important issues and look forward to questions as they come up.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF WILLIAM HUBBARD APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Dr. WENSTRUP. Why, thank you, Mr. Hubbard.

Mr. Kaufman, you are now recognized for five minutes.

STATEMENT OF RYAN KAUFMAN

Mr. KAUFMAN. Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano and distinguished members of the subcommittee, on behalf of the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America and our more than 425,000 members and supporters, we would like to extend our gratitude for the opportunity to share our views on VA's VetSuccess On Campus program.

I served in the United States Army from 2000 to 2003. I was deployed with the 1st Brigade Combat Team in October of 2001 to Kuwait and Afghanistan as a signal support system specialist. Upon my return, the proper procedures and resources were not in place to catch the post-traumatic stress that I was dealing with. At 19 years old, I came home and I was afraid of the dark. I couldn't sleep and I had a hard time eating. If a task was not mission-critical, I could not find the motivation within myself to complete the task.

Two months after I returned home, I caused an accident, almost killing myself and a friend. I was charged with driving under the influence. Everyone, including myself, just thought I had a problem with alcohol, but then I tested positive for marijuana. I had left the Army no choice, I was discharged with a general under honorable conditions.

Six months after my discharge, I was homeless. A year prior, I was part of the world's greatest machine, the United States Army, but by December of 2003 I found myself walking into a homeless shelter, unable to feed or house myself. I couldn't comprehend how

this had happened. Shortly thereafter, I was granted a couch in a friend's basement. I wish I had straightened my life out then, but this would not be my last experience with homelessness.

In September of 2004, I enrolled in college for the first time. My discharge had left me without the GI Bill, so I took out Stafford Loans like the rest of the civilian population. I would repeat the homeless cycle and enroll in college two more times, only to fail out each time in the first semester.

By 2011, I found permanent sobriety and, after four years of documented VA therapy and appeal after appeal, I was granted a service-connected disability in October of 2012. With school constantly on my mind, I immediately applied for the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program. I was interviewed, approved, and enrolled in another college. Jennifer Singer was the VA social worker who interviewed me for the vocational rehabilitation program and then was assigned to my case. The interview was tough, she asked some very personal questions. Ms. Singer advised me that she was investing in me, she was going to spend around \$100,000 on my education with her time and my education cost, as well as my supply cost.

Ms. Singer understood my background. I came from a single-parent household, my parents did not attend college, my father barely graduated high school, and my mother, my primary caregiver, never made over \$30,000 a year in her lifetime. In a place without mass transit, we did not own a vehicle until I was 15 years old. But because of the VetSuccess program, my children, both under the age of two, will understand the importance of an education, not because I said so, but because I did so.

I am currently an organizational communication major at Doane College in Grand Island, Nebraska. In the community college I attended, I was part of the honors society. We all know the statistics of children whose parents did not attend or graduate college, the challenges they face multiply immensely. But because of VetSuccess, not only will the barriers to my success be broken down, but also my children's, and they haven't even enrolled in a learning system yet.

Ms. Singer was also concerned about my mental health, my sobriety and my living situation. Her job was not merely to just make sure I attended and passed classes, she would hold me accountable, and I would give her my full effort during my Vocational Rehabilitation assignment.

Since late January of 2013, I have accumulated over 60 credit hours, transferred from a community college to a four-year school, and have kept a 3.75 cumulative GPA. After my bachelor's degree program, I will move on to a master's degree program. The master's degree will be in management, with an emphasis on leadership. Few chronically homeless individuals in this country get master's degrees and even fewer get doctorates, but that's where I am headed. Without the VetSuccess program, this would not be possible.

My counselor, Jennifer Singer, is a guardian angel. Ms. Singer and I check in with one another each month. I am accountable to my VA mental health and physical health appointments. I report to her on my sobriety, my coping skills, both positive and negative,

my current employment situation, and my family situation. Ms. Singer holds me responsible as a student, as an employee, as a father, as a sober member of society, and as a husband. She keeps the goals that I set on the forefront of my mind. Is it hard work? Hell yes, it's hard work. But someone is investing in me, so I owe them the effort and the results. She reminds me that I'm an example to other veterans in my community and, believe me, other veterans are watching. I can provide them something that no one else in the community can, proof. Proof that the VA works, proof that accountability works, and proof that we can turn our lives around if we're willing to work with someone for it.

I cannot say it enough, without Jennifer Singer and VetSuccess, my family and I would not be where we are today.

I want to thank you for your time and your attention, and I'll be happy to answer any questions you may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF RYAN KAUFMAN APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Dr. WENSTRUP. Thank you very much, Mr. Kaufman.

Welcome back, Mr. Kammerer. You are now recognized for five minutes.

STATEMENT OF JACK KAMMERER

Mr. KAMMERER. Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano, thank you for inviting me to appear before you today to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs' VetSuccess VSOC program, which is administered through the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment, VR&E service.

Since the inception of the post-9/11 GI Bill in 2009 through August of 2015, VA has issued nearly 55 billion to send 1.45 million veterans and their qualified dependents to institutions of higher education. The VA's VSOC program helps veteran students and their qualified dependents succeed through a coordinated delivery of on-campus benefits assistance and counseling by professionally experienced and trained VR&E counselors.

The VSOC program is a collaborative effort between the host institution and the VA, with the purpose of providing a supportive on-campus environment whereby veterans may obtain benefits assistance and peer support. Our 79 VSOC counselors at 94 college and university partners are able to provide this on-campus access to VA services for approximately 78,000 veterans.

VA's VSOC program began as a pilot in 2009, in which one VR&E counselor was assigned at the University of South Florida campus. To date, the program has expanded to include a total of 79 VSOC counselors providing on-campus services at 94 institutions across the United States. Acting as the primary on-campus representative of VA, the VSOC counselor provides outreach and support to all veterans on campus.

To better assist veterans in transitioning from the military to the college environment, VSOC counselors offer a broad range of counseling services, including educational, vocational and career, and adjustment counseling. They provide vocational testing and career, academic and adjustment counseling to resolve any potential problems that may interfere with or disrupt a veteran's success while attending college.

VSOC counselors also use all appropriate and necessary resources to ensure that veterans' needs are met in regards to issues or problems that may hamper the successful completion of their educational programs. Our counselors also assist veterans with referrals for more intensive health services, including mental, physical or other health treatment through our Veterans Health Administration Medical Centers, community-based out-patient clinics or the Vet Centers. VSOC counselors establish and maintain an effective network of other appropriate service providers and stakeholders who are available to assist veterans in need.

The desired outcome is to provide veterans with enhanced opportunities to achieve success in their academic endeavors, and to prepare for entering the labor market in viable and enduring careers. With our team of 79 VSOC counselors at the 94 schools, VR&E continues to provide education and vocational counseling and other on-site services to the available population at those schools of approximately 78,000 veterans on campus.

The majority of the veterans receiving services visit a VSOC counselor in person, with the others communicating with their counselor by telephone or by mail.

In an effort to expand available on-campus services, VSOC counselors are coordinating with host institutions to establish or enhance peer-to-peer veteran mentoring programs to address military-to-college transition issues. At the beginning of each fall and spring term, VSOC counselors conduct orientation sessions to assist newly enrolled veterans in acclimating to the college campus environment.

This fall, VA worked in conjunction with partner institutions to host back-to-school informational events at ten VSOC sites. These events introduced newly enrolled students and educators to the veteran student community, familiarized veterans with their VSOC counselors and services, and ultimately will work to cultivate the most supportive community for veterans at their institution.

VA is committed to the VSOC program, and recognizes the demand and the need for this program as veterans take advantage of their well-earned GI Bill benefits. VA continues to receive inquiries from institutions that are interested in assigning a VSOC counselor. We evaluate interested institutions for potential future participation in the VSOC program and we will continue to inform the committee of the evolution of the program in the future.

We continue to assess and improve the VSOC program for our most deserving population, those who have decided to commit to furthering their educational and vocational goals. As noted, we are working to substantially improve and enhance the VSOC program to include evaluating additional institutions for possible future participation.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement, and I look forward to your questions.

[THE STATEMENT OF JACK KAMMERER APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Dr. WENSTRUP. Well, I want to thank the panel, all of you, for your testimony and your written statements. And I now yield myself five minutes for questions.

Mr. Kaufman, I specifically want to thank you for your service and for having the courage to share your incredible story. It's uplifting and gives us all a lot of hope.

It's clear from your testimony that the Voc Rehab program has really given you opportunities you need to be successful. So what do you believe could be done to improve the program and make sure that we have the opportunity to help hundreds, if not thousands of veterans be successful and have stories like yours, hopefully not the first part, but the later part.

Mr. KAUFMAN. Yes, sir. Thank you for the compliments, Mr. Chairman.

In regards to policy, I would have to defer any policy decisions to the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America's DC policy team, but in my experience, the relationship matters. So the relationship that I have with my VR&E counselor matters. And I live in rural America, and geographical lines get redrawn on a regular basis and caseloads get switched. And as a gentleman who struggles with trust, putting me on a new caseload, just like with my VHA doctors, throws me for a loop. And now I'm having to remember which person to get a hold of, what's their phone number. Right when I memorize somebody's phone number, it may change to a new individual. But opening in particular the VSOC counselors to many more campuses, especially as Mr. Hubbard said from the SVA, to campuses that don't have a lot of resources, would be very beneficial, especially in my area. Because we are making an investment in the veteran, we are not making an investment in a particular institution, and our job is to make sure that the veteran is successful.

Does that answer your question, Mr. Chairman.

Dr. WENSTRUP. It does, it is very helpful, because I think one of the things that you touched on is important. You know, as a physician, I always find it important that, yeah, once in a while I may be able to pinch hit for somebody in my practice, but that is a relationship between you and the patient that really needs to be sustained. Somebody can cover for you once in a while, but to really be successful you need that time and time again and you need that bond.

So that input is very helpful to us and that may be something that we need to make sure that we monitor and that we are providing some consistency for some people, because you are at a point in your life where a lot of things are very inconsistent. And let's face it, when you are in uniform, things are pretty consistent. So that is a big shift when you go from that—you know, I have said during my deployment, I hated being away from home, but it was a simple life except for the fact that people were shooting at me, you know. And from that standpoint, I wore the same clothes every day. So that is a transition and you need that type of consistency in your life.

And to that, Mr. Harrison, if I can go to you and maybe you can expound on some of that consistency, and the doctor as well, in your programs, I would appreciate hearing that component, because that is something that I think we really need to focus on. And also maybe touch on the sharing of a counselor between the facilities and universities.

Mr. HARRISON. Thank you, sir.

Once thing that we see at the University of Cincinnati, we do have a number of colleges within a certain proximity of ours, there's about nine total, and we do have veterans from other schools calling our VSOC counselor for assistance, and her caseload is so she can't help them. That is why in my earlier statements I did mention that maybe if there was another counselor in the region who could cover those schools, the smaller schools. The total number of veterans that they have wouldn't equal the amount we have at the University of Cincinnati; however, that veteran would get their needs met.

When I was at another institution, I would hear the horror stories from veterans trying to get in touch with the Voc Rehab counselor, nobody was picking up the phone. And the office wasn't that far away where the Veterans manager would have to get in his car, go to the office, like, hey, you have veterans who have questions, they're making phone calls, but you have to get with them.

So that is why we believe that the program should expand. It is a benefit, that is a selling point we do have at the University of Cincinnati, and we try to use that to entice veterans to come to our school.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Well, I appreciate that. And, Doctor, if you could weigh in. The Ranking Member has obliged me a little more time here and I will grant him the same.

Mr. TAKANO. Today is a little more freewheeling.

Dr. WENSTRUP. I think we—

Mr. TAKANO. We have a chance to lead. Yes, go ahead.

Dr. WENSTRUP. To really dive in. And I also am curious at what you may feel, of course it depends on the number of veterans at each institution that we are talking about, but it would be nice if we could figure out a good ratio of counselors per veteran or institutions.

Doctor.

Lieutenant Colonel BRAUE. Thank you, Chairman.

We have approximately 1100, 1200 veterans on campus. We have a hundred military students, active duty, and probably 150 to 200 veterans who are no longer using GI Bill, they have run out of benefits. Our VetSuccess On Campus counselor pretty much handles just University of South Florida students. I mentioned in my testimony about the caseload, the VR&E caseload that she has now, that caseload of 50 now really inhibits her ability to reach a lot of the other students on campus. In effect, now she spends one third of her time with only less than five percent of the students on campus, because it is a little bit more intensive with, you know, managing a caseload. So that has been a problem in—but as far as the consistency, that is something we have been able to keep over the course of time she has been there.

She has been there for five years, same person, everybody on campus knows her. She has had an impact in the life of many, many veterans, in particular one that was on the verge of going to commit suicide when she had a meeting with Janine. Janine was able to stop her, walk her over to the VA, get her checked in, and today she is still in school.

So this program is an extremely valuable program and I really think that with some minor tweaks that it could be even better than it is today.

Dr. WENSTRUP. I appreciate that.

I now recognize Mr. Takano.

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Braue, am I saying your name correctly?

Lieutenant Colonel BRAUE. Yes.

Mr. TAKANO. Are you a public university or a private university?

Lieutenant Colonel BRAUE. We are a public university.

Mr. TAKANO. And what is your total student enrollment?

Lieutenant Colonel BRAUE. Total student enrollment is 48,000, a little over 48,000.

Mr. TAKANO. So 48,000. How many counselors do you have available, I mean, generally the number of counselors available to the general student population?

Lieutenant Colonel BRAUE. We have one VSOC counselor on campus.

Mr. TAKANO. One VSOC, but let's just talk about counseling in general, not counseling that is available to veterans. I want the committee to understand the plight of community colleges and public universities in terms of the availability of counselors generally, and the general challenge of retention to students who come to public universities.

Lieutenant Colonel BRAUE. Well, we have a VA counselor, just the one. We have other counseling services on the campus that are open to all students. They are not heavily utilized by our student veterans because they just are not experienced with the issues that student veterans face and our veterans won't go to them.

Mr. TAKANO. I understand that, but what I am trying to get at is this: I come from the California community colleges and we have a tremendous shortage of counselors generally. So one of the strategies has been to require every student to take a counseling class, they get a one unit credit for that class, so that the issues that a counselor would deal with can be dealt with, quote-unquote, "more efficiently." Community colleges have a general issue with retention. And so what I am trying to get at is a general counselor shortage. I come from a public school setting where in a 4,000 person a freshman class, you might have two counselors. So basically you have a 500-to-1 counseling burden. So I am just trying to say, I don't believe that the counseling function in higher education, public higher education, is much better, probably even more difficult in terms of the amount of time that a counselor is able to spend with a regular student.

Now, I am just trying to go through this background in order to shine a little clearer light on what the challenges are when we deal with a veteran who has a much more complex set of issues. So we already have a challenge in terms of retention in the general student population, now we are talking about how we address veterans who carry a lot of other issues with them.

What is the VSOC counselor caseload? About 50, you say?

Lieutenant Colonel BRAUE. Yes, sir.

Mr. TAKANO. So is that generally the case, Mr. Kammerer, that the VSOC counselors also have a VR&E kind of function?

Mr. KAMMERER. That's a good question, sir. Thank you for asking. Of the 79 counselors, I look at a regular spreadsheet of their caseload. We currently don't have a policy that says VSOC counselors cannot do a regular caseload. As Dr. Braue pointed out, we run the gamut from zero up to what I might call a full caseload. When I testified to the committee in July, I said our average caseload was about 139 per counselor. So for FY 2015, I think that was accurate. So Dr. Braue's math was about right in my head when he said if his counselor, his VSOC counselor had 50 cases, that was about one third of the average caseload.

We are looking at a policy to limit the caseload of traditional cases, Mr. Takano. The challenge we have is many of the veterans on campus are Chapter 31 clients, or some of them, and we need to serve those veterans on campus with Chapter 31 services with a traditional range of support that our counselors provide.

I use the example in Los Angeles of the VSOC counselor, as you know, that serves three—we have a cluster of three institutions in Los Angeles. The challenge, as you know, in Los Angeles is the regional office is on the other side of town from those institutions. So if we didn't serve those veterans on campus with the VSOC counselor where they are Chapter 31, we would either have to have counselors come from across town from the RO to the campuses or we would have to ask the veteran to come to the RO, which is not a good idea in Los Angeles traffic. So in many cases, I spoke to a counselor this week who was visiting for other purposes, who is a VSOC counselor, and she carried a caseload of 62 cases and she was comfortable with that in her current situation.

So it is a balancing equation, Mr. Takano, in terms of serving the veterans.

Mr. TAKANO. Let me get to Mr. Kaufman.

Mr. Kaufman, I also want to express how moved I was by your testimony and thank you for your courage, thank you for your service to our country, thank you for continuing to serve our country by being so open about your life and your struggles, and for being a success. That is going to be such—you already are a hero, you will be a bigger hero to show—no, seriously. I mean, I have veterans in my community dealing with a number of issues and to see somebody get through that is going to be an enormous inspiration to them.

Now, tell me about, you talked about your relationship with the VR&E, because you are getting your education through your VR&E benefits, not through post-9/11, which we know VR&E is a much more generous program, if you can qualify for it. You initially went through taking out loans, you didn't really know about your educational benefits. Was it the VSOC counselor that kind of got you straightened out, is that what happened?

Mr. KAUFMAN. So first of all, Mr. Takano, thank you for again the compliments. It was actually, it would have been a Mr. Harrison or a Dr. Braue that pulled me to the side and advised me of VR&E, and then a year later we got a VITAL counselor. What the VITAL counselor can provide is VA benefit access sooner, almost immediate, rather than me attempting to contact my VR&E counselor, especially in September and in January when she may have 150 veterans trying to reach her. This VITAL counselor, if I am

having benefit issues, back payment issues or overpayment issues, he has the ability to contact the VBA on my behalf and then relay any news from the VBA.

Mr. TAKANO. Well, your story and your challenges are giving me a window into understanding what happens and how veterans become homeless and how they go through initial missteps.

I am concerned about the caseload of VR&E of 50 people to that one VSOC person. I mean, you have a huge student veteran population and I can imagine the counselor just totally being challenged because, it is a lot of work. You hear Mr. Kaufman's story and you see how much time and energy it takes for that trusted person to do their job, that is just—50 people, I am not saying that all of them, you know, will be as intense as Mr. Kaufman, but I can imagine that a lot of them are. So I can't imagine that we don't have a presence on campuses, that is my thing, that we don't, you know—go ahead, Mr. Braue, will you respond?

Lieutenant Colonel BRAUE. Thank you, sir. I completely agree, having this VetSuccess On Campus counselor is essential, it is absolutely essential. The caseload, the Chapter 31 caseload that she has does take away from her ability to meet the needs of other people who might need her services and a Chapter 31 case, it can be intensive. Having her on campus, it makes her more accessible than most VR&E counselors who only come to campus once in a while. So her being on campus, her caseload, the members, the people that she is managing can walk in two or three times a week to see her, which then exacerbates the problem of her not being able to reach other people. So she is really spending more time on the Chapter 31s than she would if she were not a VR&E—if she was a VR&E somewhere else. So that becomes an issue too.

But having her on campus, even with a smaller caseload, I think we could agree that, you know, there is a limit that she could have. However, 50 does seem to be a little excessive from what we have been able to observe over the past several months.

Mr. TAKANO. Thank you, thank you.

Dr. WENSTRUP. First of all, let me thank all of you today. I think in a short time we really learned a lot and we got a lot of good information.

Mr. Hubbard, I appreciate your input too with the changes that you recommend.

And I hope, Mr. Kammerer, that you got as much out of this today as I think we did, and that benefits all of us.

So I look forward to continuing to work with everyone here today to ensure that we reach our goals and take care of our veterans, who deserve no less than our great attention.

So, finally, I ask unanimous consent that all members have five legislative days to revise and extend their remarks and include any extraneous material in the record of today's hearing.

[No response.]

Hearing no objection, so ordered.

And if there's nothing further, this hearing is adjourned. Thank you

[Whereupon, at 2:48 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

PREPARED STATEMENT TERENCE HARRISON

Good afternoon. I'd like to thank Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano, and Members of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity for inviting me to participate in today's hearing on the Department of Veterans Affairs' VetSuccess on Campus Program.

My name is Terence Harrison and I am the Manager for Veterans Programs and Services at the University of Cincinnati. The University of Cincinnati, or "UC," is a public research university, enrolling more than 44,000 undergraduate and graduate students in 2014. Our campus is made up of students from all 50 states and from 100 countries around the world. Recognized as a Military Friendly School, UC is both a leader and champion in military and veteran related issues. Currently, UC enrolls about 2,392 military-affiliated students, including active duty military, members of the National Guard and the Reserves, veterans, and family members. Of this total, 1,016 students are using GI Bill benefits. With the anticipated draw-down of active duty personnel, the University of Cincinnati is energetically positioning itself to accommodate these students. UC adheres closely to the VA's principles of excellence in providing a high-quality educational experience tailored to the unique needs of veteran students.

The University of Cincinnati continues to hold a positive view of the VetSuccess on Campus, or "VSOC" Program. UC is home to one of the three VSOC programs in the state of Ohio—with others located at The Ohio State University and Cleveland State University. The VSOC program aims to assist veterans and servicemembers, as well as their dependents, as they transition from active duty to postsecondary education. Through the VSOC program, a VA Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor is assigned to UC to support student veterans and assist with any problems that arise that may interfere with the education of a student veteran.

At UC, student veterans regularly reach out to VSOC for assistance on a range of matters, including: expediting and resolving issues with VA education benefits; looking up pending VA payments and when they can expect to receive them; explaining VA payments clearly; assisting in applying for education, healthcare, and other VA benefits; questions about their remaining benefits; and understanding and resolving VA debt.

VSOC is a valuable resource for our student veterans, and ensures that they receive expedient service from the VA while they attend UC. Our VSOC counselor has been with the VA for over nine years and has been helpful in establishing a successful VSOC program at UC.

The University of Cincinnati's partnership with the VSOC Program began in September 2013. At UC, the VSOC office is housed within the same building as the Veterans Programs and Services Office to conveniently meet the needs of student veterans and to provide a cross-functional team approach to resolving challenges that our veterans face. Housing the VSOC office and our VSOC Counselor on campus also allows UC to coordinate with the VA.

UC annually enrolls an average of 1,200 student veterans, active duty military, and beneficiaries using VA education benefits. Throughout the year, VSOC contacts all of these students several times to offer VA support. VSOC allocates time each semester to meet with student veterans at the University, including at both of UC's regional campuses. In addition to these meetings, VSOC also participates in numerous outreach events throughout the academic year, including Student Resource Fairs and awareness training sessions for advisors, faculty, and staff.

VSOC conducts additional outreach activities, including employment workshops focusing on translating military skills into a civilian resume, recognizing post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury symptoms, new student orientation, town hall meetings, job fairs, and health fairs in collaboration with VA Medical Centers.

VSOC also works with other groups on campus and within the community to collaboratively support the needs of UC's student veterans, including the Ohio beta chapter of Omega Delta Sigma, a co-ed, veteran-only fraternity; the Tristate Veterans Community Alliance; the VFW Ohio; and AMVETS, among others.

In addition to VSOC, the University of Cincinnati is also a Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership, or "VITAL," Location. VSOC and VITAL together have developed a streamlined approach in assisting veterans with VA Medical Center needs. This approach provides UC's veterans with expedited VA Medical Center service coordination at the Cincinnati VA Medical Center.

In order to best meet the needs and improve services for our student veterans, we believe it is important to expand the VSOC program to additional schools. For

smaller schools that do not have a VSOC, we suggest the VSOC work with a number of schools in a geographical area. For example, in Ohio, one counselor could oversee Xavier University, Cincinnati State Technical and Community College, and Mount St. Joseph University. The case load of these counselors could be comparable to the caseload at larger schools and give the student veterans at these institutions the support they need.

As for improved coordination between universities and the VA, we have found that housing our VSOC counselor on campus has allowed UC and the VA to easily collaborate, which is beneficial to our student veterans.

In closing, I want to thank you for allowing me to discuss the VSOC program and to share the great work that the University of Cincinnati is doing to accommodate veteran students. I look forward to working with you as you expand services for veteran students and again offer the University of Cincinnati as an example to inform policy and to guide schools in shaping their programs.

I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

Terence Harrison

PREPARED STATEMENT OF DR. LAWRENCE A. BRAUE

Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano, on behalf of the University of South Florida, thank you for holding today's hearing and allowing us to share our experience with the VetSuccess on Campus Program (VSOC) and the impact it makes on our campus every day. By way of background, the University of South Florida (USF) is a high-impact, global research university dedicated to student success. It is the 8th largest university in the U.S. and serves over 48,000 students. In addition, over 2,000 veterans and their families are enrolled as students at USF. USF was ranked by Military Times Best for Vets magazine as the 5th best college for veterans. Under the leadership of President Judy Genshaft, the University of South Florida has become a national leader in serving student veterans.

In June, 2009, The University of South Florida became the first institution of higher learning to participate in the Department of Veterans Affairs VetSuccess on Campus program. Ms. Jeanine Frederick is our current VSOC Counselor and has served in this role since June, 2010. Ms. Frederick quickly became an integral member of the Office of Veterans Services team and an effective liaison between USF and the VA. Ms. Frederick is an amazing Counselor and has made this program a complete success on our campus.

Program Successes

Having the VSOC Counselor available to veterans on a daily basis has vastly improved the university's ability to meet the needs of our students. In addition, it has greatly increased the confidence of our student veterans in the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Through the VetSuccess on Campus Program, our Counselor developed an extremely effective outreach program that dramatically increased the awareness of VA programs and benefits available to student veterans. This calendar year, Ms. Frederick has helped over 300 veterans individually and reached over 750 students through campus outreach events. She is frequently called upon to advocate for veterans with faculty members who do not understand the challenges our disabled veterans face in the classroom.

In the Fall of 2013, Ms. Frederick initiated a highly successful Vet-to-Vet Tutoring Program where academically successful VA Work Study veterans would provide one-on-one tutoring for other student veterans. Since this program started in the Fall of 2013, over 165 students have received individualized tutoring services at no cost to the veteran.

Program Challenges

The VetSuccess on Campus program has not been without its challenges for the University of South Florida. It is important that I clarify that I can only speak for the University of South Florida and what we have experienced. The VetSuccess on Campus program is influenced by two separate offices within the Vocational Rehabilitation and Education arm of the VA. Often times, those two offices provide our VSOC Counselor with competing or conflicting guidance. Because the Regional Office has very limited understanding of VSOC and is not involved in the day to day operation of the program, it makes it very difficult for them to provide effective supervision for the VSOC Counselor.

Over time, the VetSuccess on Campus program's purpose and goals changed without a collaborative effort with university.

For example: Recently, the VR&E Regional Office assigned a Chapter 31 caseload of 50 to our VSOC Counselor. This is approximately 1/3 of the Chapter 31 caseload for a full-time VR&E Counselor. This is a significant change which alters the way VSOC functions on our campus. This change is also inconsistent with the Memorandum of Understanding between USF and the VA which creates a hardship for the VSOC Counselor and the school. This effectively reduces her ability to have a positive impact on the academic and lifelong success of the total veteran population.

In order to maximize the effectiveness of our partnership, the university should be part of the program development and decision making process.

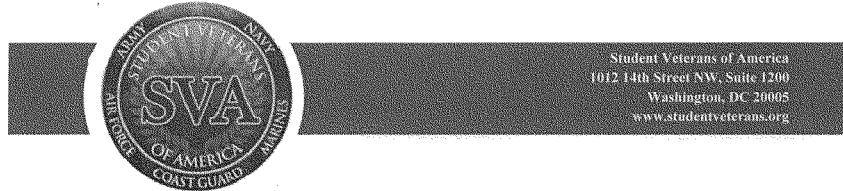
I believe with a few structural and leadership modifications, this program could greatly enhance retention and graduation rates for student veterans using the Post 9/11 GI Bill.

My recommendations are to:

1. Simplify the reporting structure for the VetSuccess on Campus Program by creating one office to manage the program and the VSOC Counselors and ensure that VSOC Counselors do not receive direction and guidance from multiple sources.
2. Establish and maintain consistent, meaningful dialog between the VA and the university ensuring that the university has a voice in program development and the decision making process.
3. I also believe it is critical that the VA include colleges and universities in the plan to develop success metrics for graduation and retention of veterans using the GI Bill.

Again, I want to thank the committee for allowing the University of South Florida to share our experience with the VetSuccess on Campus Program. It is an honor and a privilege to have this amazing program on our campus. I hope we can build upon the successes of the program and make the adjustments necessary to make the program even stronger for our future student veterans.

Thank you.



**TESTIMONY OF
MR. WILLIAM HUBBARD
VICE PRESIDENT OF GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS
STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA**

BEFORE THE

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING ON THE TOPIC OF:
"THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS' VETSUCCESS ON CAMPUS (VSOC) PROGRAM"**

OCTOBER 22, 2015



Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano and members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit our testimony on "The Department of Veterans Affairs' VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) Program." 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.

With this opportunity to address the VSOC program, we will discuss the program's successes, areas for improvement, and the related issue of Post-9/11 GI Bill processing challenges that we saw this fall.

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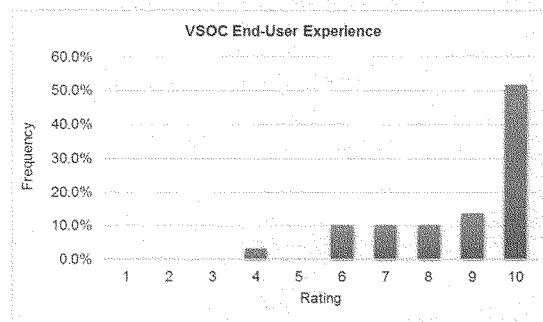
Areas of Success

Once student veterans arrive on campus, the tools and opportunities they have access to in their first few weeks often dictate the tone of their career in higher education. For student veterans at 94 campuses across the country, they have the benefit of a VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) program. The VSOC program entails the campus having a VSOC Counselor, or full-time VA detailee, right on campus. We are highly supportive of the program's intent, which we believe to be quite complimentary with our own mission. As VA specifically notes, VSOC is intended to, "help student Veterans and their qualified dependents succeed and thrive through a coordinated delivery of on-campus benefits assistance and counseling leading to completion of their education and preparing them to enter the labor market in viable careers."¹

We frequently hear student veterans identify the VSOC program as a top benefit that they find to be most valuable for their higher education experience. When surveying over 30 student veterans from 12 schools that participate in the VSOC program, the response was overwhelmingly positive. More than 85% of stakeholders including SVA Chapter Presidents, Chapter Members, and Chapter Advisors rate VSOC as a 7 out of 10 or higher on a 1 – 10 scale. Additionally, three out of five respondents say they rate their program as a 9 or 10 (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2. VSOC Stakeholder Ratings

¹ Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015, <http://www.benefits.va.gov/vocrehab/vsocfactsheet.asp>



We asked our student veterans and stakeholders who self-identified as being highly knowledgeable or somewhat knowledgeable about VSOC to share what impact VSOC has had on their experience with higher education. One student veteran shared, "We have a VSOC Counselor from the VA come to the school twice a month so Vets can start a new claim or ask questions concerning a claim. This helps immensely as the VA hospital is a 35 minute drive from school and keeps our Vets on campus. Vets can ask our counselor any type of question concerning their benefits. They are also a Vocational Rehabilitation (VocRehab) counselor for a few of the Vets on campus. We are incredibly lucky to have this program on campus."

In addition to appreciating the on-site access to a qualified VA counselor, many alluded to a direct personal impact on their academic performance. Another student veteran shared, "The VSOC has been there to help me through the transition from soldier to student. Counseling, advising, financial help, even tutoring has been afforded to me through the VSOC. The VA representative has gone above and beyond to help me succeed, especially when school and life became overwhelming for me."

These comments are indicative of the general feedback we received from members over the past several months in our field research on the program. In addition to the general support provided by VSOC counselors, student veterans noted the ability of counselors to quickly correct and process certifications as a major benefit to their campus. They often appreciated the connection counselors make with school administration as well. We believe the VSOC program is highly beneficial to student veterans and would like to see it expanded as resources allow.

Opportunities for Improvement

While the feedback we received was almost uniformly positive—in fact, when asked what they would change, respondents commonly replied, "nothing"—we have identified several opportunities for improvement of the program. The three most common improvements included: awareness of the program, expanding to more campuses, and increasing additional personnel support for the program.



Unsurprisingly, a top issue identified was the number of campuses that are afforded the opportunity to participate in the program. Given the presence on only 94 campuses in a field of more than 4,000 IHLs in higher education, the program's prevalence is an issue we hope to see addressed; the positive reaction to the program shows a high return on investment for those who opt to participate. The challenge of awareness was also a common issue we identified, which is equally unsurprising given the many activities and opportunities that compete for the attention of student veterans.

One student veteran noted the issue of raising levels of participation, noting, "We have approximately 600 veterans on campus. We have a large day-room which averages 50 veteran visits daily. We also host a number of events each semester but turn-out to those events usually results in approximately 10 participants. We would love to have higher participation in off campus events and fundraisers." Others identified and interest in having more VA personnel on-site to support the program. We understand that increased support is a factor of resource constraints, and would prefer to see more campuses programs established before additional staff are added to current sites.

In addition to the most common issues, several individuals cited that counselors appeared to be distracted by the "many directives from national." As a program requirement, VSOC counselors are directed to participate in community engagement activities which has been cited to be burdensome and time-consuming for some. In one instance, a student veteran supporting the VSOC office as a work-study aid noted, "National told us to host an event but barely gave a week's notice. Then they wanted us to do media engagement and said we were required to send the results up but we weren't ready for that with such short time."

Another issue is that VSOC counselors are perceived to have "lighter workloads" than their peers at regional offices. As result, some counselors are given the most challenging and time-consuming cases that may prevent them from effectively focusing on their VSOC duties. Also, in some instances vacation schedule have conflicted with the school schedule in some cases. We recommend that counselors are encouraged to take vacation days during less busy periods versus the peak times such as the first few weeks of the fall semester. These blackout periods may help ensure that student veterans gain as much value from the VSOC program as possible.

Lastly, several student veterans reported challenges with the process of entering the VSOC program. One student veteran shared, "I would change the intake process and be upfront about qualifications for all program tracks. I see a lot of veterans who are qualified but do not want to go through horrible intake process. Many veterans drop out of program due to lack of intrusiveness. Scuttlebutt is rampant between veterans on how to game the system. This has to change in order for program to be effective and genuine."

Processing Issues

This fall semester highlighted several challenges that directly impacted student veterans. In early to mid-September, it became increasingly clear that many student veterans were experiencing significant delays in the processing of their GI Bill benefits. We heard comments from student veterans like, "We just cannot figure out why enrollment forms keep getting lost" and, "Unfortunately, it is affecting many veterans who rely on that for rent. These are veterans who were certified before even July." Much speculation among the student veteran population ensued, and we appreciated VA's commitment to responding in a timely



manner. Within days of SVA highlighting the issue, VA presented clear and user-friendly information directly to the student population through social media avenues (See attachment).

Unfortunately, the hundreds of comments VA received over just a few days after posting the statement made it clear that the delays were causing a significant ripple across campuses nationwide. Part of this backlog of delayed processing could be attributed to miscommunications. One student veteran noted:

"Before I joined SVA, I came right off deployment and started using what was left of my GI Bill. I enrolled as soon as I could and still had massive delays. I would contact the VA and they said they wouldn't have my certifying info. I'd go back to the registrar's office and they would say they sent it. Then I would go back to the VA and they said no they didn't have it. Come to find out somehow they would mix up my SSN with some other number. Well, the VA didn't enquire if something sent was incorrect and the university VA office would assume what they sent was correct. They weren't communicating at all. Their process in certifying students wasn't helping either."

However, a more systematic issue could be attributed to the delays. Another student shared, "Part of the backlog is due to overtime not being allowed sooner because they were diverting overtime resources to the disability claims process, and then finally allowed overtime later than usual for education claims." This message was consistent with what VA staff discussed with SVA prior to the semester. VA staff specifically requested to know if student veterans within SVA chapters were seeing delays so they could be addressed readily. We are appreciative of VA's responsiveness, and feel that communicating that message earlier might have helped to avoid some confusion.

Ultimately, the core challenge remains VA's reliance on overtime hours for full-time employees during the peak periods of fall and spring enrollment. We agree that hiring seasonal staff to address these spikes would be both uncommon as well as costly. At the core of it, one student veteran highlighted the issue well, noting, "The biggest issue is managing throughout at both the school and the VA. There are not enough people managing such a manual-labor intensive job, and to do everything required for compliance, it is next to impossible, especially when you have larger populations changing schedules."

Potential Processing Solution

The issues of labor, compliance, and timeliness may all be addressed by a potential solution through one of our mutual partners, the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). As a partner of both VA and SVA on the *Million Records Project (MRP)*, NSC demonstrated a high level of professionalism and ability during the MRP, traits which make them an ideal partner in any project. NSC presently works with the Department of Education (ED) on processing and reporting Title IV funds, including Direct Subsidized/Unsubsidized Loans, Direct Graduate PLUS Loans, Direct PLUS Loans, Federal Pell Grants, Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants (SEOG), and Federal Perkins Loans. Their data collection capabilities are not limited to student loans, however.

A partnership with NSC would facilitate the data exchange between IHLs and VA for certifications, recertifications, status changes and completion data. In practical terms, the NSC would act as a consolidation warehouse where data could be vetted and instantly sent to VA without requiring any additional steps. As an analogy, consider that when Americans pay their taxes, many choose to pay a tax



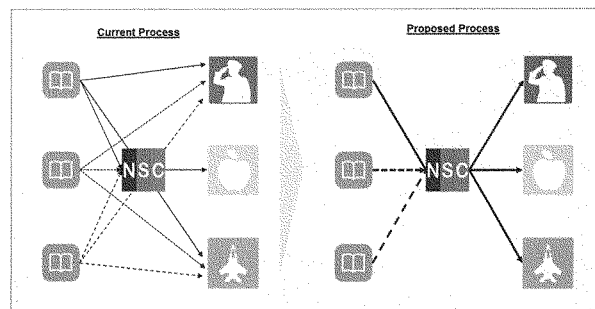
accountant to prepare the forms, which allows them to avoid mistakes while gaining from the expertise of someone who knows how to ensure compliance. Similarly, NSC would act in the capacity as a tax accountant does, allowing the school to have peace of mind that their data is being properly filed, while giving VA the benefit of having pre-screened and fully-compliant data submissions.

Since VA and ED would be collecting data through a centralized source, the requirement for schools to submit redundant data is negated; most student data is standard, while only a small percentage is unique to any department or agency which is easily accounted for and sorted through NSC. NSC presently has access to the student full enrollment profile, not only students with Title IV loans, for over 97% of all students in higher education.

Under this proposal, VA and taxpayers incur no additional cost since schools select to send the data through NSC, paying for the cost of the service, while VA benefits from streamlined data submissions and research capabilities in conjunction with ED data. The ability to have real time measurement of completions and program efficacy would be a major benefit to VA and the broader research community; this is essential given the lack of available data outside of the *MRP*.

The benefits of this proposal are clear: accelerated data submissions, fewer errors, increased compliance, and advanced research to benefit student veterans. It is our hope that we can with VA and NSC to bring this concept from possibility to reality. For a clear visual demonstration of what a partnership with VA, ED, and DoD would look like, see Figure 1 below. We believe that a process transformation would enable student veterans to get into the classroom with certification or processing issues presenting fewer challenges.

Figure 1. Process Comparison





Our Final Thoughts

Often overlooked, VSOC counselors are well-positioned to serve as ideal VocRehab counselors. Given their proximity to the school and frequent interaction with students, they develop a strong trust within the IHL. We are pleased to see this continue and encourage more emphasis to be placed on the unique opportunity this represents. Overall, the VSOC program is a great success and we believe it has had a clear impact on helping many student veterans to succeed on campus as intended. The support VA has provided directly to student veterans on the 94 VSOC campuses is always welcomed, and we strongly encourage VA to consider expanding to additional schools.

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We thank the Chairman, Ranking Member, and the Subcommittee 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 subcommittee, the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, 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.



Statement of Ryan Kaufman
Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans of America
before the House Committee on Veterans Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
Thursday, October 22, 2015

Statement of Ryan Kaufman
of
Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans Of America
before the
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
for the hearing on
A Review of VA's VetSuccess on Campus Program
October 22, 2015

Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and our more than 425,000 members and supporters, we would like to extend our gratitude for the opportunity to share our views of VA's VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) program.

I served in the U.S. Army from 2000-2003. I was deployed with the First Brigade Combat Team in October 2001 to Kuwait and Afghanistan as a Signal Support Systems Specialist. Upon my return, the proper procedures were not in place to catch what I was dealing with. At 19-years-old, I came home and was afraid of the dark; couldn't sleep; and had a hard time eating. If the task was not mission critical, I could not find the motivation within myself to complete the task. Two months after I returned home, I caused an accident, almost killing myself and a friend. I was charged with driving under the influence. Everyone, including myself, thought I just had a problem with alcohol. But then I tested positive for marijuana. The Army left me no choice; I was discharged with a General under Honorable Conditions.



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During this same time period, my mother was diagnosed with stage four cancer of the throat and lungs. She was given six months to live and made it to December 2003. Six months after my discharge, I was homeless. A year prior I was part of the world's greatest machine, the United States Army. But by December 2003, I found myself walking into a homeless shelter, unable to feed or house myself. I could not comprehend how this had happened. Shortly thereafter, I was granted a couch in a friend's basement. I wish I had straightened my life out then, but this would not be my last experience with homelessness.

In September 2004 I enrolled in college for the first time. My discharge left me without the GI Bill, so I took out Stafford Loans like the rest of the civilian population. I attempted college two more times following this 2004 attempt. I failed out in the first semester each time. Juggling work, relationships, family, and an addiction is not conducive to a learning experience. I would repeat the homeless cycle and enroll in college two more times, in 2008 and 2010.

By 2011 I finally found permanent sobriety. After four years of documented VA therapy, and appeal after appeal, I was granted a service connected disability in October 2012. With school constantly on my mind, I immediately applied for the Vocational Rehabilitation/VetSuccess Program, was interviewed, approved, and enrolled in another college, after paying the back balances on my student loans.

Jennifer Singer was the VA social worker who interviewed me for VA Vocational Rehabilitation and was then assigned to my case. The interview was tough. She asked some very personal questions. She also asked me what it is I wanted to do. I told her as a chronically homeless veteran with mental health and



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substance abuse issues, I wanted to make a living as a social worker. I wanted to help other veterans like myself. She said that was an admirable goal, but with my background, my life's baggage, and my new family, being on the front lines wouldn't be the best choice for me. I vehemently disagreed, but she challenged me and asked me to look at the salaries of social workers across the country. I found that a social worker makes \$40,000 per year on average. She asked me if I could raise a new family, give them the opportunities I was never granted, and still live comfortably on \$40,000. We agreed probably not.

Ms. Singer told me she was investing in me. She was going to spend around \$100,000 on my education, with her time invested, my education cost, and supply cost. She stated it was not a great investment for her to throw that kind of money towards an education that would only burn out two years after employment. And she was correct. I asked her how could I make a difference then. She told me I could make a difference from the flank. We all don't need to be on the front lines to make an impact.

Ms. Singer understood my background. I come from a single parent household. My parents did not attend college. My father barely graduated high school. My mother, my primary caregiver, never made over \$30,000 in her lifetime. In a place without mass transit, we did not own a vehicle until I was 15-years-old. Because of the VetSuccess program, my children, both under the age of two, will understand the importance of an education. Not because I say so, but because I did so. I am currently an Organizational Communications major at Doane College in Grand Island, Nebraska. And at the community college I attended, I was part of the Honors Society. We all know the statistics of children whose parents did not attend or graduate from college. The challenges they face multiply immensely. Because of VetSuccess, not only will the barriers to my success be



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broken down, but so will my children's. And they have not even enrolled in a learning system yet.

Ms. Singer was also concerned about my mental health, my sobriety, and my living situation. Her job was not just to make sure I attended and passed classes. We made an agreement. She would hold me accountable, and I would give all of my effort during my vocational rehabilitation assignment. Since late January of 2013, I have accumulated over 60 credits, transferred from a community college to a four-year school, and have kept a 3.75 cumulative GPA.

After I complete my Bachelor Program, I will move on to a Master's Degree in Management with an emphasis in Leadership. Few chronically homeless individuals in this country receive Master's Degrees. Fewer get Doctoral Degrees, but that is where I am headed. Without VetSuccess, this would NOT have been possible.

My VA social worker, Jennifer Singer, is a guardian angel. Ms. Singer and I check in with one another each month. I am accountable to my VA Mental Health and Physical Health appointments. I report to her monthly on my sobriety, coping skills (both positive and negative), my current employment situation, and my family situation. Ms. Singer holds me responsible; as a student, as an employee, as a sober member of society, as a father, and as a husband. She keeps the goals that I set on the forefront of my mind. Is it hard work? Hell yes it is. But someone invested in me, so I owe effort and results. She reminds me I am an example to other veterans in my community. Believe me, other veterans are watching. I can offer them something no one else in the community can: PROOF. Proof the VA works. Proof accountability is positive. Proof we can turn lives around if we are willing to work with someone for it.



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I cannot say it enough, without Jennifer Singer, and the VetSuccess program, my family and I would not be where we are today.

Thank you for your time and attention. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.



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Biography of Ryan Kaufman
Nebraska Veteran Team Leader, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America

As a Nebraska Veteran Team Leader, Mr. Kaufman travels all over rural Nebraska to connect veterans with needed resources and one another. He also coordinates events, VetTogethers and peer support programs. He is currently a Junior at Doane College in Grand Island, NE majoring in Organizational Communications. Mr. Kaufman is a former Army Specialist who was deployed in 2001 to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Statement on Receipt of Grants or Contract Funds

Neither Mr. Kaufman, nor the organization he represents, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, has received federal grants or contract funds relevant to the subject matter of this testimony during the current or past two fiscal years.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF JACK KAMMERER

Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to appear before you today to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) program. The VSOC program is administered through our Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Service.

Since inception of the Post-9/11 GI Bill in 2009 through August 2015, VA has issued nearly \$55 billion to send 1.45 million Veterans and their qualified dependents to institutions of higher education (institutions) under the program. VA's VSOC program helps Veteran students and their qualified dependents succeed and thrive through a coordinated delivery on-campus of benefits assistance and counseling by professionally experienced and trained VR&E counselors. The VSOC program is a collaborative effort between the host institution and VA with the purpose of providing a supportive, on-campus environment whereby Veterans may obtain benefits assistance and peer support. With our 79 VSOC counselors at 94 college and university partners, we are able to provide on-campus access to our services to approximately 78,000 Veterans.

VSOC Program Overview

VA's VSOC program began in 2009 as a pilot project in which one VR&E counselor was assigned to the University of South Florida campus. VA realized the success of the pilot, and by the end of 2012, the VSOC program grew to include 27 full-time VR&E counselors who served over 9,600 students spanning 32 campuses in 16 states. In late 2012, invitation letters were sent to colleges and universities nationwide to solicit their interest in participating in the next VSOC expansion. To date, the program has expanded to include a total of 79 VSOC counselors providing on-campus services at 94 colleges and universities throughout the United States.

Acting as the primary "on-campus" representative on behalf of VA, the VSOC counselor provides outreach and support to all Veterans on campus. To better assist Veterans in transitioning from the military to the college environment, VSOC counselors offer a broad range of counseling services, including educational, vocational/career, and adjustment counseling. They provide vocational testing and career/academic and adjustment counseling to resolve any potential problems that may interfere with or disrupt a Veteran's success while attending college. VSOC counselors also use all appropriate and necessary resources on campus, in the community, and within VA to ensure that Veterans' needs are met in regards to issues or problems that may hamper the successful completion of their educational programs. VSOC counselors also assist Veterans with referrals for more intensive health services, including mental, physical, or other health treatment, through our Veterans Health Administration medical centers, community-based outpatient clinics, or Vet Centers. VSOC counselors establish and maintain an effective network of other appropriate service providers and stakeholders who are available to assist Veterans in need. The desired outcome is to provide Veterans with enhanced opportunities to achieve success in their academic endeavors and to prepare for entering the labor market in viable and enduring careers.

VSOC Update

With its team of 79 VSOC counselors at 94 partner institutions across the country, VR&E continues to provide educational and vocational counseling and other on-site services to an available population of approximately 78,000 Veterans on campus. The majority of Veterans receiving services visited a VSOC counselor in-person, with the others communicating with their counselor by telephone or email. In an effort to expand available on-campus services, VSOC counselors are coordinating with host institutions to establish or enhance peer-to-peer Veteran mentoring programs to address military-to-college transition issues. At the beginning of each fall and spring term, VSOC counselors conduct orientation sessions to assist newly enrolled Veterans in acclimating to the college campus environment. This fall, VA is working in conjunction with partnering institutions to host "Back to School" informational events at 10 selected VSOC sites. These events will introduce newly enrolled students and educators to the Veteran student community, familiarize Veterans with their VSOC counselors and the services they can provide, and ultimately work to cultivate the most supportive community for Veterans at each institution.

VA is committed to the VSOC program and recognizes the demand and need for this program as Veterans take advantage of their well-earned GI Bill benefits. VA continues to receive inquiries from institutions that are interested in assigning a VSOC counselor to their institution. VA evaluates interested institutions for potential future participation in the VSOC program, and we will continue to inform the Committee of the evolution of the program in the future.

Conclusion

VA continues to assess and improve the VSOC program for a most deserving population of men and women who have decided to commit to furthering their educational and vocational goals. Through the updates noted, VA is substantially improving and materially enhancing the VSOC program, to include evaluating additional institutions for possible future participation.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer questions from you or any of the other members of the Subcommittee.

