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AN UPDATE ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FOREVER GI BILL, THE HARRY W. COLMERY EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANCE ACT OF 2017

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
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AN UPDATE ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FOREVER GI BILL, THE HARRY W. COLMERY EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANCE ACT OF 2017

Tuesday, December 12, 2017

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
U. S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
Washington, D.C.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:05 p.m., in Room 334, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Jodey Arrington, [Chairman of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Arrington, Bilirakis, Wenstrup, Rutherford, Banks, O'Rourke, Correa, and Rice.

STATEMENT OF JODEY ARRINGTON, CHAIRMAN

Mr. ARRINGTON. Good afternoon, everyone. This Subcommittee will come to order.

I want to apologize in advance, I am going to have to step out. And I will return shortly and have asked Congressman Bilirakis to preside in my absence. So, thank you for that.

I want to thank everybody for joining us for today's hearing of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, where we will begin our first oversight hearing on the implementation of H.R. 3218, the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017, also known as the Forever GI Bill.

This bill was signed into law by President Trump on August 16th, 2017. It is a great example of what Congress can do when we put the American people and, in this case, our veterans first and foremost.

In addition to the efforts of Chairman Roe and other Members of this Committee, the Forever GI Bill was the result of the good efforts of many of our VSOs, two of whom are joined here with us today on the panel: Student Veterans of America and the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors.

This was the first major improvement to the GI Bill since 2011 and encompassed over 30 provisions brought forth by many Members of this House who share all of our commitments to the men and women who serve either in uniform or alongside their active duty spouse or parent.

While we can all be proud of this collective achievement to pass the Forever GI Bill, this Subcommittee's work has just begun and it is critical that we work in tandem with the VA, with veterans

groups, and other stakeholders, as the Department begins the implementation of this newly expanded and revised bill, so that we can ensure that it is rolled out seamlessly.

Many of you can remember the significant delays that beneficiaries experienced back in 2009. I actually wasn't here then, but I am told there were delays in 2009 and we don't want that in this round of implementations. And this happened after the passage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill and I am sure, again, we can all agree that such delays can't happen again. And it is our job to identify any problems and solve them and have a smooth implementation, cost-effective for all stakeholders involved.

I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the VA's Education Service's efforts to schedule regular calls with the Committee staff on both sides of the Hill to update them on the implementation. However, I think it is important that we have these hearings, so that we can discuss as Committee Members and we, as Committee Members, can lend our support and our help to you, General Worley, and others in the Department as you work to implement this reform package.

I do have some concerns about the focus this process is getting from the VA senior leadership. This is a theme for me, it seems, as we have found that education programs are often overlooked within the Department as a whole.

I understand the Secretary and his leadership team have many priorities, but I hope they understand that it will be no small feat to execute such a large reform initiative such as this bill, which will result in over $3 billion worth of changes to the GI Bill for generations of veterans and their families to come.

Our investments and the taxpayers' investments in veterans' education benefits and the impact that the Forever GI Bill will have on our future success of student veterans is, I am sure you will agree, an extremely important endeavor and we have got to get it right. So I urge the Secretary and this Administration to do whatever they have to do to give folks the resources, especially the IT resources in this case, that they need to roll this package out effectively without major hiccups, again, like we saw or were experienced in 2009.

Before I yield to Ranking Member O'Rourke, I do want to focus in for just a moment on these IT resources I just mentioned. I am anxious to hear some of the testimony and I certainly have some questions about this.

Since joining this Committee, it has always been clear that VA's IT systems and plan upgrades are often so convoluted that when Congress makes changes to the GI Bill or forms needs to be updated, the patchwork system of IT programs is not able to keep up, which can cause significant delays for student veterans. I am concerned, because the Subcommittee has been told during multiple hearings in the past that the plans for these systems would ensure agility, so that the VA could quickly address the changes that were made in the law. As we have seen, however, that just hasn't been the case.

Directing IT resources to education programs is not often a focus of the Department and I hope this practice does not continue, especially for something as important as the Forever GI Bill. And I look

forward to continuing to work with the VA and my fellow Members to ensure these resources are provided where and when needed.

Now I want to yield to my friend and Ranking Member, Mr. O'Rourke, for any opening remarks he might have.

STATEMENT OF BETO O'ROURKE, RANKING MEMBER

Mr. *O'Rourke.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

There is not too much that I can add to your excellent opening comments, but to thank you and the majority staff and the minority staff for ensuring that we have a successful hearing today for those about to testify, for our colleagues and their questions. I think all of us want to make sure that the Forever GI Bill is implemented successfully, and that we anticipate any concerns ahead of time and work constructively together between Congress and the Administration to see how we can ensure that those are resolved.

And, like the Chairman, I see the biggest challenge being one with IT. So I appreciate the fact that General Worley is here and that he has brought someone who can help to answer those questions, and suggest how we work together to ensure that this goes smoothly and seamlessly for transitioning servicemembers and for veterans.

I also want to thank the Veterans Service Organizations that are here today to testify. I am looking forward to hearing what they have to say.

I yield back.

Mr. ARRINGTON. I want to thank the Ranking Member.

I now invite our first and only panel to the table. With us today, we have General Robert Worley, Director of VA's Education Service, who is accompanied by Mrs. Charmain Bogue, Deputy Director of VA's Education Service, and Mr. Lloyd Thrower, Acting Information Technology Account Manager for the Benefits Portfolio within VA's Office of Information and Technology.

Mr. William Hubbard, Vice President of Government Affairs for Student Veterans of America; and Mrs. Kathleen Moakler, Director of External Relations and Policy Analysis at Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors.

So thank you guys again for being here today. Before we begin with your testimonies, I ask that the witnesses, if you would please stand and raise your right hand.

[Witnesses sworn.]

Mr. ARRINGTON. Thank you. Please be seated.

Let the record reflect that all witnesses answered in the affirmative.

Your complete written statements will be made part of the hearing record and all of you will be recognized for 5 minutes for your oral statements.

Let's begin with you, General Worley. You are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF MG ROBERT M. WORLEY II USAF (RET.)

General *Worley.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Good afternoon, Chairman Arrington, Ranking Member O'Rourke, and other Members of the Subcommittee.

I am pleased to be here today to discuss VA's work on implementing the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017, also referred to as the Forever GI Bill.

Accompanying me today is Mr. Lloyd Thrower, Office of Information Technology, Account Manager for the Benefits Portfolio, and Mrs. Charmain Bogue, Deputy Director for Operations in Education Service, and VA's project lead for Colmery Act implementation.

On August 16th, 2017, the President signed into law the Colmery Act, which makes sweeping changes, which corrects inequities, expands benefits, and truly changes the way we view the GI Bill for the future. It is the most comprehensive set of changes to education benefits since the enactment of the Post-9/11 GI Bill in 2009.

The Colmery Act has become known as the Forever GI Bill because its most recognized feature is the removal of the 15-year time limitation for eligible dependents and veterans transitioning out of the military after January 1st of 2013 to use their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits.

Other important features of the law are that it restores benefits to veterans who were impacted by school closures since 2015, expands opportunities for STEM and IT training, provides increases in funding for state approving agencies, and enhances benefits for surviving dependents and Purple Heart recipients.

The importance and complexity of the Colmery Act led VA to establish a cross-functional Program Executive Office within existing resources responsible for leading and coordinating all Forever GI Bill implementation activities.

Also in record time, VA awarded a 12-month program management contract that provides further support to the PEO through the addition of additional expertise and IT training and communications.

The law requires a significant IT effort with 22 of the 34 provisions requiring IT modifications at an estimate of $70 million. OI&T has committed to providing a solution for the most pressing of these provisions, Sections 107 and 501, which change the way VA pays monthly housing benefits.

VA will assure continued timely processing of additional claims related to the Colmery Act and will stand up new initiatives such as the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship by establishing specialized teams, using its more experienced claims processors, and by hiring 202 additional temporary employees in the field.

VA has taken significant steps since the law's signing, first focusing on the 15 provisions that were effective on date of enactment, and executing an expansive and multifaceted communications campaign to highlight and promote the Colmery Act's improvements to affected beneficiaries and other stakeholders.

Specifically, VA has promoted the Colmery Act extensively through a new Web page, social media, a variety of outreach activities, traditional media, as well as frequently asked questions. VA has been posting multiple updates on its GI Bill Facebook page. And in November, VA held a Forever GI Bill Twitter Town Hall, reaching over 170,000 users, and participated in a satellite media tour, conducting interviews with 23 radio and television stations, reaching 4 million viewers and listeners. We also have sent out

three mass emails to 1.2 million stakeholders, and have conducted multiple briefings to school certifying officials and Veterans Service Organizations.

As you know, many of the Act's provisions target certain categories of beneficiaries, so VA is also conducting more targeted notification where and when needed. For example, we have identified and notified nearly 8,000 education beneficiaries that may be eligible for restoration of entitlement under the school closure provision. In just under one month, VA has already received over 400 applications and has restored 1800 months of entitlement to over 200 beneficiaries.

In just under 4 months, VA has moved out quickly and is working hard on successfully implementing all of the provisions of the Colmery Act on time. There is a great deal of work remaining, with 13 of 34 provisions effective on August 1st of 2018. VA has already started on revising regulations, developing policy, designing training, preparing communications, and more as we move forward.

We look forward to continuing to work with all of our partners and stakeholders on these efforts.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to responding to any questions the Committee may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF GENERAL WORLEY APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. BILIRAKIS. [Presiding.] Now we will recognize Mr. Hubbard. You are recognized for 5 minutes. Thank you.

STATEMENT OF MR. WILLIAM HUBBARD

Mr. HUBBARD. Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member O'Rourke, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America to testify on the implementation of the Forever GI Bill.

With nearly 1500 chapters representing over 1.1 million student veterans in schools across the country, we are pleased to share the perspective of those directly impacted by the subjects before this Committee.

Signed into law this August, H.R. 3218, commonly known as the Forever GI Bill, made history. As one of the most significant pieces of higher education legislation to occur this century, millions of service-affiliated students will have greater access to education and training, thanks to the efforts of this Committee and the 115th Congress.

We would like to share some brief history and intent from our perspective on the legislation, which was a case study in partnership and bipartisan discussion.

This past year, we launched a special focus on the importance of sustainability in programs, driven by outcomes and fueled with data-driven decision-making. The Forever GI Bill includes dozens of solution-oriented provisions such as the work study authorization, Science Technology Engineering and Math scholarships, removal of the time limit on the GI Bill, and many other provisions, which increase access to education.

The new law will also address inequities of this earned benefit and looks forward to the future well beyond our own generation. As leading advocates for the bill, we are committed to the complete and timely implementation of this law. With that interest in mind, we thank the Committee for this opportunity to highlight several key areas of success, as well as some which have room for improvement.

We applaud the Department of Veterans Affairs for their dedicated staff, for demonstrating great initiative in implementing the Forever GI Bill, especially their very public communications effort to make those affected aware of upcoming opportunities.

Until the Forever GI Bill, student veterans attending schools with unexpected closures were the only students in higher education with no reasonable recourse to recoup their benefits. The most prolific examples of these include the closures of Corinthian Colleges and ITT Tech. Unfortunately, thousands of student veterans were adversely affected due to the poor performance of these schools, and we applaud VA for producing an application for these students to apply for restoration of their benefits.

We are concerned that so few students have applied for the restoration of benefits under the school closure provision since the notice from VA went out to these students. Like our concerns with reaching eligible Purple Heart recipients, the integrity of individual contact information within the VA system may not be reliable. We encourage VA to partner with external organizations such as Student Veterans of America and others to reach out to the widest audience possible.

Turning to the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship. This provision originated from H.R. 5784 from the 113th Congress, the GI Bill STEM Extension Act, a bipartisan bill cosponsored by Congressman David McKinley and Congresswoman Dina Titus. We were a proud partner in the formation and advocacy of this effort, and we are pleased to see it as a law. Student veterans consistently site this as a component of the Forever GI Bill with which they have the greatest interest.

As the Forever GI Bill was being developed, it became increasingly clear that the implementation costs, particularly IT changes and upgrades, would be a significant driver of cost. We have major concerns on whether or not the offices implementing this law are receiving adequate resources to execute this overall.

The Forever GI Bill represents a significant shift in education for veterans and in higher education in general. More important than inputs and outputs are outcomes; that is more apparent today than ever. The GI Bill is an American success story because it has demonstrated results.

As President Thomas Jefferson said in 1808, the same prudence which in private life would forbid us paying our own money for unexplained projects forbids it in the dispensation of public monies. With the implementation of Forever GI Bill we raise the question, who should be allowed to play in GI Bill land? Consider the precedent of the VA Home Loan Program. Many banks do not qualify for these loans due to the rigorous and strict standards, leading to outcomes impressive by any standard, and perhaps the same should be thought about for the GI Bill.

We thank the Chairman and the Ranking Member for inviting us to testify, and look forward to any questions you may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF MR. HUBBARD APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Thank you so very much.

Now I will recognize Mrs. Moakler for 5 minutes.

Mrs. MOAKLER. Thank you.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. You're welcome.

STATEMENT OF MRS. KATHLEEN MOAKLER

Mrs. MOAKLER. Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member O'Rourke, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors thanks you for the opportunity to talk about issues important to the families we serve, the families of the fallen.

While the mission of TAPS is to offer comfort and support for surviving families, we are also committed to improving support provided by the Federal Government for the families of the fallen: those who fall in combat, those who fall from invisible wounds, and those who die from illness or disease. TAPS appreciates the attention the Committee has paid to making sure that veterans and surviving family members have benefits that give them access to quality education.

TAPS provides specialized support through our Web education portal regarding the education benefits available for the children and spouses of America's fallen heroes. TAPS staff members work with each individual to maximize the financial support they can receive to complete their education from both government and private agencies. This also allows us to hear from the survivors where they encounter problems and stumbling blocks in the process.

We are most grateful for the provisions included in the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017 that support survivors, and most appreciative of the opportunity to comment on the implementation of this legislation.

We have heard from many of TAPS surviving spouses concerning the implementation of the Forever GI Bill. While they are most appreciative of the enhanced benefit, many have concerns. We have worked with the VA to solve many of them.

First of these is the delimitating date, the date found on a VA certificate of eligibility that informs the individual of the date they are no longer eligible for education benefits. As of early December, eligible students are still receiving the letters with the 15-year delimitating date. While some students are aware of the delimitation date, they are reluctant to actualize their education plan until they have the correct information on their certificate of eligibility.

TAPS did query the VA Office of Economic Opportunity about this discrepancy. The office offered that while IT upgrades are in process the system does not currently allow the letter to go out without a delimitating date. We appreciate the steps that this office has taken to develop a work-around, including enhanced training to call center personnel to assure eligible recipients that indeed there is no delimitating date; sending letters informing spouses that have previously applied that there is no delimitating date; and

manually changing new certificates of eligibility until they find a permanent solution.

As said before, the success of the implementation is entirely dependent on changes to the IT system. We hope there will be appropriate funding to expedite this process.

While mandatory training for school certifying officials is included in the Forever GI Bill, we are concerned about the schools being fully aware of the changes coming in August 2018. Information is being pushed out by the VA. We hope there will be coordination within the schools, so that the person actually talking to the student is aware of the changes.

TAPS' biggest concern with all the changes being implemented in August is that there will be delayed payments for veterans and survivors enrolled in the fall 2018 semester. Even with the few changes that went into effect this fall, there were issues with schools demanding payment from the students because of delayed VA payments. Students receiving VA payments were not allowed to attend classes, register for spring 2018, or use campus facilities because the VA payment was delayed. In some cases, students were put on payment plans they could not afford or forced to take out student loans with egregious origination fees in order to continue the education program.

TAPS would recommend that students receiving VA payments have the same protection as those who receive Title IV funding such as Pell Grants and Federal student loans who are not penalized for a late payment. TAPS strongly believes that the best way to do this is through a legislation change. We have been in discussion with HVAC majority staff to assist these students.

The proposed legislation would give the Sec VA the ability to disapprove any course of education unless the educational institution providing the course permits individuals to attend or participate in courses pending payment from the VA and accepts a certificate of eligibility is a promise of payment.

Continued cooperation between the VA, the Committee, and interested VSOs, MSOs, and survivor advocates is essential to make the implementation of the Forever GI Bill a success. TAPS will continue to provide feedback to both the VA and the Committee on the experience of survivors.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF MRS. MOAKLER APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. BILIRAKIS. You're welcome. And I thank the panel for their testimony today.

Now I will recognize myself for 5 minutes for questions. The first question will be for General Worley.

General—first of all, thank you for your service to our country—General, on a conference call last week, Subcommittee staffs were informed that due to a problem with the VA's IT system the Department will still have letters and certificates of eligibility that will be sent out to the Chapter 33 beneficiaries that show that their GI Bill benefits expire, despite the change made in Section 112 of the Forever GI Bill.

On the call, the proposed work-around wasn't to fix the system, but to send the beneficiary a separate letter telling them to basically ignore the first letter.

What are the Department's plans to address the situation, this particular situation, which if not addressed will certainly cause mass confusion for all program participants?

And, you know, it is really—I can't believe that this is happening and, you know, our soldiers deserve better, they deserve certainty. So if you could please answer that question, I would appreciate it very much.

General *Worley.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I couldn't agree more. We want to put out consistent and accurate information to our beneficiaries, and we appreciate the concern that the Committee has on this.

I will answer this, I will start with part A of the answer and I will turn it over to Mr. Thrower to talk about part B of the answer.

Part A of the answer has to do with the initial certificate of eligibility that was mentioned by our colleague here at the table. So that is the initial original claim that comes in and we issue a certificate of eligibility after we have done what we need to do to check eligibility requirements. Those are manually generated and we can, and we will start this month, manually updating those letters so that it is clear, because there will be—well, not for the certificates of eligibility starting now, but we have to check the eligibility and make sure it is after January of 2013, and then those letters will be updated accurately to reflect whether there is or is not a delimiting date.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. How much time will that take to manually update the letters?

General *Worley.* These letters are partially—they are manually produced anyway, the initial certificate of eligibility. So it is a little bit of added time to the claims examiner's work to do that, so it is not a big impact.

The bigger impact that we were concerned about has to do with the enrollment letter—the award letters. So every term someone goes to school, they get an award letter that updates them on the amount of benefit they have left and what they are being paid in housing and so forth. Now, the reason these letters are difficult to change quickly is because they are integrated and tied into the code of the long-term solution, our automated solution.

So I will turn it over to Mr. Thrower to talk about what we are doing with respect to the award letters.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Please.

Mr. THROWER. Yes. Thank you.

And, you know, since our discussions with staffers on Friday, we have actually gone back, I have been working with my engineering team and we have built—we will be delivering a work-around, we will be delivering a solution in our March release of LTS.

The key thing here is making code changes to the logic that generates the letters. We are doing this at the same time while we are in a massive effort, which I discussed with this Committee back in June, of trying to decommission BDN, which is another system, part of that patchwork that Chairman Arrington that we are trying to clear up.

So we are sort of in the process of eliminating the patchwork underneath the hood. At the same time then making changes within LTS while we are doing that is a problematic and risky thing that we are trying to manage that risk.

That said, there are a few things that we are committed to doing and making happen within the LTS system while we are doing the decommissioning work on BDN. One of those will be the changes to letters. We will have those done within the March release of LTS.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Is there a possibility you can contact, obviously the heroes, to ease their mind, maybe verbally over the telephone, what have you? Maybe not an official notice, but have you considered that as well?

Or, you know, if you can post it to a Web site or get it to the congressional offices, so that we can get the information if they call in?

General *Worley.* Absolutely, we can do that. This is relatively late-breaking news, so we will put that on our media——

Mr. BILIRAKIS. You definitely have to——

General *Worley.* —on Facebook——

Mr. BILIRAKIS. —get the word out, absolutely——

General *Worley.* —on our updates to the Committee.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. —Facebook, what have you——

General *Worley.* Yes, sir.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. —social media. We can all help.

General *Worley.* Absolutely.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. All right. I don't have much time left. Why don't I go ahead and yield to the Ranking Member. Thank you.

You are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. *O'Rourke.* Thanks.

I have a number of questions, but I don't know that I understand the answer yet to Mr. Bilirakis' question on this 15-year time limit. Are letters going out today still erroneously saying you have to use this within 15 years?

General *Worley.* Yes.

Mr. *O'Rourke.* And I am not a programmer, but I got to think that—and don't go into detail, but I got to think that that is not a 3-month fix. You said by March this will be fixed. I mean, can somebody as they are printed out just manually with a Sharpie cross that line out before it goes in or can we do that in the code?

It doesn't sit with anyone, probably yourself included, General Worley. Is there a way we could do this now instead of in 3 months?

General *Worley.* I don't think so, Congressman O'Rourke.

I understand the incredulity of you can't change a letter quickly, but, again, the letters that go out are integrated and part of essentially the automated code. And they need to be that way, because we are sending personalized information to each beneficiary related to their benefits and how much they are getting and those kinds of things. It is not just going into a Word document and changing a few lines, it is much, much more complicated than that.

So we would love to do it more quickly, but I am relying on our IT colleagues to tell us what is within the realm of the possible and how quickly we can do it.

Mr. *O'Rourke.* And maybe there is someone out there in the private sector or in the volunteer community who would be willing to take a look at this code and offer their expertise if we are so taxed in being able to change this. Just not to in any way undermine the success that you have shown in being able to implement this following the August signing, but this is something that I think sticks out for everyone.

Another issue that Ms. Moakler brought up is the delayed VA payments and she suggested using the Pell Grant model. Any thoughts on that, General Worley?

General *Worley.* I don't have any particular view of that right now, sir. We haven't really addressed that issue in my office, I certainly would love to talk more about that. I suspect that would clearly take legislative change to do it that way——

Mr. *O'Rourke.* Yeah. And you seem to——

General *Worley.* —and we would be happy to work with the Committee.

Mr. *O'Rourke.* Yes. So you will give us your feedback on that and I understand the majority staff may already be working on this. We would certainly from the minority side want to be able to work on this as well and make sure that we are successful.

Mr. Hubbard, I loved your point about the outcomes more important than the inputs and we have had this conversation about several programs that come through this Committee. I want to make sure that we are fully measuring outcomes here as well, and you suggested that we should have greater scrutiny and higher expectations for the educational institutions that are participating.

Any specific recommendations as we continue to perfect this law or administratively anything that General Worley could run with?

Mr. HUBBARD. Yes. Thank you for the question, Mr. O'Rourke, I appreciate that, and I think it is a relevant and really critical point.

Today, and my colleagues from the VA can correct me, but I think it is somewhere in the realm of 14,000 programs are approved for GI Bill dollars. 14,000, that is crazy. All of those schools, I suspect, are not delivering good outcomes for student veterans. I know that firsthand, I could probably point out a couple that we all know of. And I think, ultimately, the focus on outcomes versus just what is going in and what is coming out is absolutely critical.

What we know is student veterans are winners and, when given the right tools to succeed, they do every single time. And so that is something that we have a special focus on as it pertains to things that could be changed.

There are some internal tools that I know of that the VA is taking a look at to increase their standards and really have some rigorous methodology as applied to who is available to get GI Bill dollars. I think that is something that perhaps the Committee would be interested in taking a look at and work with certainly us and many of our partners in the non-profit space to implement as well.

Mr. *O'Rourke.* Yes. And I am going to yield back to the Chairman, but as I do, I think if we are able to follow this very good recommendation, I think it has to be tied to some measure of outcomes, so that we truly understand performance for these different programs; not just did the student complete the course of study,

but then what was their earning potential in the following 10 years, or were they able to find a career or a role or function or purpose, and I think all those are incredibly important.

So, thanks for raising that.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Agreed. I appreciate that.

Mr. Rutherford, from the great State of Florida, my colleague, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. RUTHERFORD. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you, panel, for appearing here this afternoon.

And, General, I would like to begin with you and ask, can you tell me how aware have you made the senior political leadership at VA aware of the challenges that implementation of this legislation has created for you?

General *Worley.* I have personally briefed the Secretary just a matter of a few weeks after the Colmery Act became law with those challenges, both the IT assessment of about $70 million and our initial assessment of what would be required in terms of people without IT solutions. So I am very confident that the Secretary is aware of those challenges.

We have come a long way since that particular briefing in terms of the Office of Information & Technology stepping up to addressing the two most critical initial provisions dealing with housing allowance, which had the biggest people impact. And so those are underway, along with the massive effort on BDN, as Mr. Thrower mentioned. And some of that has been absorbed in terms of the funding. We need more funding later, but at this point we have come a long way. So, I think the senior leadership is aware of these challenges and we are getting the support.

Mr. RUTHERFORD. Okay. And to drill down on the IT a little bit, Mr. Thrower, 22 of 34 elements are going to require IT, as I heard earlier. Can you talk about, has there been anticipation of what the 2019 budget needs to look like to give you the capabilities that you need within IT to fully implement Colmery?

Mr. THROWER. Yes, we have had pretty extensive discussions internally about what it would take to do this. And actually, at the Secretary's request, we have actually been looking at alternative approaches of managing this endeavor as well. One of the—for instance, one of the most significant things that we will have accomplished in eliminating—consolidating all education services around the LTS platform, eliminating BDN and several of the—a lot of the patchwork under the hood is we will be given—we will have the opportunity actually to even potentially look at this as a managed service.

And so we are going to be looking—we are going to have sort of a decision date this spring of where we are with the decommissioning effort, what our options are in the external market, what our options are within if we go the in-house development. I think because of the work that we are doing and the work under the hood with BDN, we are actually going to have a lot more options from an IT perspective of different ways that we could solve this problem.

Mr. RUTHERFORD. Very good. And I want to ask Mr. Hubbard and Mrs. Moakler about, you know, the fact that educational serv-

ices, the oversight falls within VA benefits, and there has been some discussion about some unique problems that that creates.

And, Mr. Thrower, before they comment, do you see that as an issue for IT that the oversight is under benefits as opposed to education services? I mean, you work across different chains of command anyway within VA, I am sure.

Mr. THROWER. I actually think it is a really good fit within benefits, in fact, because of many of the other—at least from an IT perspective, I look at many of the capabilities we have delivered over the last few years have been able to—have created certain services that are allowing us to integrate capabilities across the Department.

The fact that we now, for instance, have an electronic e-folder that consolidates and has in one place things like birth certificates, marriage certificates, other critical documents, that is now being—that can be used by education benefits or——

Mr. RUTHERFORD. Different——

Mr. THROWER. —many of the other areas. This has been a great benefit to us and is creating a lot of flexibility we otherwise didn't have.

Mr. RUTHERFORD. Okay, I am just about out of time.

Mr. Hubbard and Mrs. Moakler—Mr. Chairman, if they could just briefly——

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Yes.

Mr. RUTHERFORD. —answer—is that a problem for you? And, Mrs. Moakler, I think you actually mentioned a legislative issue that could help with some of this oversight; was that correct?

Mrs. MOAKLER. Yes, but that was pertaining to the delay of payment of the VA benefits to the colleges, who weren't allowing the students to take advantage of re-registering for the next semester or——

Mr. RUTHERFORD. Just with that certificate?

Mrs. MOAKLER. Yes.

Mr. RUTHERFORD. Yes, okay.

Mr. Hubbard?

Mr. HUBBARD. I think it is an excellent question, Mr. Rutherford, and thank you for addressing it, because I am actually going to disagree a little bit with my colleagues from VA on this one.

I have seen long-term the focus on outcomes is lost when economic opportunity as an office is buried within benefits. I believe there is an opportunity to perhaps elevate that office as an issue area and provide some potentially preventative medicine. We know that individuals who have a Bachelor's degree or higher oftentimes have great success in life; we would like to see more of that. And, unfortunately, I think the IT debate highlights the fact that there is some perhaps disinterest within the larger organization, not out of any particular spite, but more by the fact that it is a huge organization of more than 360,000 employees and, when you are talking about a small subset of that, it is difficult to get the right attention. I believe that there is definitely opportunity to elevate that office.

Mr. RUTHERFORD. And I agree with your focus on outcomes.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. ARRINGTON. No problem. I will recognize Mr. Correa for 5 minutes.

Mr. CORREA. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I just want to thank the panel for being here. Very difficult issues, but I appreciate you being forthright and honest about the challenges that we have in front of us.

I am not going to get mad. I am not going to get angry over the fact that we have these letters going out with these mistakes causing confusion out there with the veterans. Fourteen thousand approved institutions where veterans can get their education services and as Mr. Hubbard said, we are not focused on outcomes.

Just a couple of days ago, I was talking to a gentleman that said, you know, Lou, you have a lot of these openings in California for this huge construction project that we have got coming online. We don't have the skill to train individuals, building trades, the electricians, the specialists. We have got the president talking about a trillion-dollar infrastructure project coming online here early January, February, or at least they initially start to discuss these projects. And, again, we have got 14,000 institutions, I am wondering how many of those are going to prepare our veterans for a good education.

Where do we go from here? It looks like we have challenges in terms of turning this very complex agency department quickly to address these issues on a timely basis. A question to all of you is we thought about possibly employing social media to let veterans know what the real information out there is, what they factually are.

General *Worley.* Thank you, Congressman.

We have leveraged social media in a huge way with respect to getting the word out. We have a Web site, as I mentioned in my testimony. We have web pages dedicated to all the Colmery Act provisions with links, for example, to the application if you are a school closure—impacted by a school closure. We put things on Facebook pretty much daily emphasizing certain aspects, especially——

Mr. CORREA. And what is the outcome then of, you know, I have a daughter that is 17. I have got kids in their early 20s and Facebook is where they live—not on web pages, but Facebook.

General *Worley.* Facebook.

Mr. CORREA. Have you gotten good response? And I am thinking to myself, as you are trying to put out the good information on Facebook, accurate information, you are sending out letters that are inaccurate.

Creation will be of confusion out there if somebody sees an official letter from your department versus something on Facebook, maybe we ought to stop sending out those inaccurate letters and focus on social media, getting out the right information.

General *Worley.* And that is what we are doing. The Facebook dialogue is continuous. And if you would like some of the feedback about that, some of it is disgruntlement, quite frankly, with the fact that, you know, the forever part only starts 1 January of 2013. People that became eligible or were discharged prior to that, in some cases, you know, have concerns about that.

So, there is ongoing dialogue of various concerns. We are trying to push out the information correctly. We are fixing the letter problem. The C of E's, the initial letters will be fixed this month and

at least within a couple of months, we will have the logic fixed for the award letters. Thank you.

Mr. Hubbard, I am running out of time, but Mr. Hubbard, I just wanted to ask you to, and the rest of the panel to, engage with us, with my office, with the others here and try to figure out how to focus on outcomes, because, you know, this is not a new problem. We have heard this over and over again when I was in the state legislature in California. You are not training our students for the right job openings and so how can we get to that point where we are training veterans for, you know, 50-, 60-, 70-, $80,000-a-year jobs when they come back stateside.

It is not rocket science. It is essentially putting one opportunity in front of these veterans and making sure they are ready to seize that opportunity. Whatever suggestions you have, please; we are here to listen, sir.

Mr. HUBBARD. Well, and thank you for that, Mr. Correa. I think it is a great point.

We find that student veterans are making good decisions as it pertains to their career paths when they have the right information. If they are informed consumers and they know what they are looking for and they see the long-term solution to it, it is an easy decision.

Unfortunately, in a lot of cases, they are not getting the right information and so that is why we are making such a strong push to make sure that they get that.

Mr. CORREA. I guess my question is—I have got six seconds—is, why aren't they getting the right information and how can we get them the right information?

Mr. HUBBARD. Another very, very good point. And I think it points to the fact that the Transition Assistance Program on the DoD side of the House is, perhaps, worth taking a look at, as well.

Mr. CORREA. Mr. Chairman, I yield.

Mr. ARRINGTON. I agree with that.

Mr. Banks, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. BANKS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General, great to have you back to the Committee once again. Back in March, with the help of this Subcommittee, I introduced the Veterans Success on Campus Act of 2017, which would make a pilot program a permanent program. It was rolled into the Forever GI Bill package, which we were very proud of.

And I wondered if you could give us an update today on—maybe elaborate on the progress that the VA has made with the program now that it is permanent. Have you seen more veterans using it? I know it has only been a short period of time, but have you started expanding the number of campuses? Can you give us an overall update on how that is going?

General *Worley.* Thank you. As you know, Congressman, that is—the VR&E is a separate office from me, but I can tell you that from what I understand now, the Colmery Act codifies, as you have pointed out, the Veterans Success on Campus is a highly successful program. I believe it is at—serving about 90-some—over 90 campuses.

My understanding at this point is we don't have plans for expanding the program this year. Beyond that, I would have to take back any further status for the record.

Mr. BANKS. Can you elaborate on the lack of planning for expansion, as it was clearly a priority in the bill.

General *Worley.* We understand that, sir. I would have to take that for the record and have the VR&E folks respond to that for you.

Mr. BANKS. We would appreciate some feedback on that in the future. Appreciate that.

Could you also give us—provide some more information on the performance of the VA Education Call Center in Oklahoma and what type of training they are receiving on the legislative changes that were enacted in the Forever GI Bill.

General *Worley.* They have received training on this from the beginning, fact sheets and so forth, in order to be able to respond appropriately. As you know, that is a big lift with 31 education provisions as part of it, some of them quite complicated. And so we are—not only have rolled out the scripts and those kinds of things for them to use, but then continuing to evaluate and improve them as we go along.

Mr. BANKS. Okay. That is all I got. Thank you very much.

Mr. ARRINGTON. Thank you. Mrs. Rice, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. RICE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

So, if I can just say, it is not the fault of anyone here on the panel, but this is why people have no faith in government. You pass a historic bill like this and the agency that is charged with implementing it doesn't have the tools it needs to implement it and it is just insane. I mean, I just don't understand that. I can't change something like taking out a 15-year provision.

And I just—it is so disappointing that—maybe this is something that we have to address with Secretary Shulkin, that we have to do more to help him.

Can anyone—excuse my ignorance, but how long have you been implementing it, over what period?

General *Worley.* The law was signed on August 16th of 2017, so we are about four months into the effort and——

Ms. RICE. Have you seen any increase in people applying, understanding that there—they actually can apply now, thinking that maybe before they couldn't or is it too early to calculate that?

General *Worley.* Well, I guess it depends on which population you are talking about. Some of it is just information to get out, specifically, with respect to the—no longer having a delimiting date for those that exit service after 1 January 2013. Some of them are very targeted, as I mentioned. There are two provisions within the school closure piece; one of it is retroactive back to January 2015 so that we can try to make whole, to some degree, those who were affected by school closure, the ITTs and Corinthians, as we mentioned earlier.

And we have put out communication to them. We developed the application and put out the application and we are receiving those and processing those requests as we speak. And as I mentioned, we

have already restored, I think it was 1800 or so months of entitlement to people.

So that—several of the provisions, I mean, we are moving out and getting the ones that are near term, taken care of. Many of the provision are not affected until—effective until 1 August of 2018. So, it kind of depends.

And there are others that are targeted, such as the Purple Heart recipients and those kinds of things, and the Fry Scholarship. So we have pushed out communication, especially on the near-term pieces to try to inform people as quickly as possible that they may be impacted by a particular set—provision or set of provisions.

And as was mentioned, we have armed-up the call center and we are putting it out on all of our social media and those types of things. So, we are trying to get the word out.

Ms. RICE. Just one question. One part of the bill required the VA to provide educational and vocational counseling services for certain individuals at locations on institutions of higher learning campuses, as selected by the VA. Next to this on the sheet that we have, it says "no action needed." So, you find that the counseling is sufficient or maybe I am not understanding that?

General *Worley.* You may be referring to the provision Congressman Banks was mentioning about VSOC, codifying the VSOC, Veterans Success on Campus, counselors. So, those—that, again, at this point, I am not aware of any plans this fiscal year for expanding the VSOC counselors on campus, but I will take that and back——

Ms. RICE. But, did—is that one of the things that you said that you recently spoke to Secretary Shulkin about the things that you would need to implement this bill. Is that one of them?

General *Worley.* No, ma'am. The specific provisions I was briefing Secretary Shulkin on had—were all the education, the ones that fall within my office, the education service-related ones; 31 of the 34 provisions in the law are being implemented by my office. There are three provisions that have to do with VR&E, and that is one of them. So——

Ms. RICE. So, who is responsible for implementing that?

General *Worley.* There is a counterpart colleague of mine, Mr. Jack Kammerer, who is the director of VR&E for the VA.

Ms. RICE. So no one here can answer that?

General *Worley.* I will have to take that back.

Ms. RICE. Okay. Thank you.

General *Worley.* Yes, ma'am.

Mr. *Bilirakis. [Presiding.] Thank you. I talked to the Ranking Member and he agrees we should have a second round. If you guys are okay with that, we want to proceed.

So, I want to thank you again for being here and then providing the benefits for our heroes. What they have earned and deserved has always been my top priority in the United States Congress.

With that, I want to ask the general, I think that it is so very important—and I think all of us agree on this—for us and those watching at home to hear how the improvements we made in the Veterans Education Assistance Act of 2017 are being implemented. Again, Ms. Rice alluded to that and the status of these reforms.

So, my first question is related to my bill, the Veteran Act, which was incorporated into the overall bill that was signed into law in August. My provision would provide the VA necessary funding and resources to update its information-technology systems, to improve the timeliness and accuracy for processing of claims for educational benefits. My provision directed the VA to submit within 180 after the enactment of this act, a plan to implement such improvements.

So, my question is, can you discuss what efforts, General, thus far, have been made in this effort? Are there initial hurdles or barricades to get this section implemented, specifically this section? Is the VA on track to submit this plan to Congress with the timeframe, the 180-day timeframe of enactment? If you could answer that, I would appreciate that.

General *Worley.* Mr. Chairman, that is one of many of the provisions that I mentioned that, obviously, require IT effort that will happen in the future and I will defer to my colleague, Mr. Thrower from the Office of IT if that is okay.

Mr. THROWER. You know, in terms of how, you know, planning all of that, what we are doing to automate systems across the board, we have been analyzing the provisions of this act and looking at the status of all systems within the education realm that we manage. We have been building a plan to show the transition that we are looking at over the next few years and we are on track to provide you that report in, I believe, this February.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. This February?

Mr. THROWER. Is that the 180 days? I believe it is.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Within the 180 days? It is pretty close. I would say I think it is within the 180 days. Okay. Well, we are going to hold you to that.

Let me go ahead and get on to the next question. Can you explain why the VBA, again, the general, VBA Education Services needed to hire 200-plus additional temporary workers to manually process claims because the IT system are not able to automatically process the claims?

General *Worley.* Yes, Mr. Chairman.

And there are probably two or three categories. So, I mentioned in my oral testimony, specialized teams. So, there are certain aspects of the Colmery Act that cannot be processed within in the current automation without huge, huge changes. And I would point out the STEM Scholarship is one of those provisions because it is not just nine additional months of benefits; there are parameters associated with the STEM Scholarship with respect to who is eligible, how much of a program you have completed—it is a program of greater than 128 hours—and you can only go up to $30,000 per individual.

So, there are many parameters that are, what we would say, outside of the system, for processing those claims. We need probably around 40 to 50 people as a team, is our estimate right now, just to process who we think would be eligible under that STEM Scholarship program.

Another one has to do with, in the more near term, is the School Closures Act. We are trying to hire 27 people right now and we have got—we are in the hiring process as we speak to work the school closures pieces of that. These claims that are coming in are

essentially manually processed. As we get the applications, they have evaluated by people, by our claims examiners, our more experienced claims examiners and processed and put into the system through those means.

So, there are two or three specialized teams that we have to put together that consist or makes up a fairly significant part of that 200 and then the rest of that 200 will be put at our regional processing offices as augmentation to the claims examiners that are there today in order to provide the manual workarounds that we have to do until the IT comes onboard. So, it is just additional people-power, if you will, so that we can try to maintain the timeliness that we have today and not get into delay situations that you may have heard about.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. So, when we implement the IT portion, which is the Veterans Act, my bill, you think we will see improvements?

General *Worley.* Absolutely.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Okay.

General *Worley.* Because you are talking about automating original claims process. Absolutely.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. All right. Very good.

I will yield to the Ranking Member, Mr. O'Rourke, for 5 minutes.

Mr. *O'Rourke.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And I have a few questions for General Worley. Before I do, this will be my last opportunity to do this, because he is moving on to the next stage in his career, but as with many of the Members of Congress, I have the benefit of being able to work with a military fellow who comes to our office for a year and helps us to better understand the issues on this Committee, on the other Committee on which I serve, House Member Services.

Captain Mark Walden has just been a pleasure to work with and gives me a lot of faith and confidence in the quality of Americans that we are recruiting and who enlist and we just wish you much luck in these next steps in your career and it adds a little bit to the urgency that we have in this job and our responsibility to make sure that we are following through on our commitments and our obligations here. So, I just wanted to publicly acknowledge your service and thank you for working with us this year.

General Worley, when you were asked by Mr. Correa about outreach on social media, you had earlier given us the stat about 8,000 beneficiaries that you are trying to reach out to that have been subject to these school closures and we want to make sure that we are connection them with the resources that they need to finish their academic studies.

You said 200 or so have been helped so far. What does that tell you on this issue and on the issue about having to wait another three months to correct the 15-year delimiting statement? Help me understand your urgencies around these issues and whether you see this as a problem, if this is what you expected, and that might go so ways towards setting our expectations on the Committee. It seems like a low number to me; if there are 8,000 and only 200 have been helped.

General *Worley.* I would just respond to that by saying the initial notice went out on November 9th, so we are, what, five weeks into the process in terms of—and, again, that doesn't mean that is

the first communication; we have been trying to flood the pipes with communications across the board on all of these provisions, especially the near-term ones—but I think it is—quite frankly, I think it is too early to tell whether that is a low number or a high number. We will continue to, of course, you know, take these in, process them as quickly as we can and if we need more communication or need to reach out to the 7,000—whoever hasn't responded yet, we will do that.

I don't know that it is realistic to expect that we will get 8,000 applications because, quite frankly, the hope is that the information that is out there would be sufficient for people to look at it and make their own choice, whether they think they are eligible or not. And we always encourage people to submit a claim if there is any question as to their eligibility. But—especially, with respect to this school closure.

If you have transferred credits to a comparable program, then you are not eligible for restoral of your benefit between January 2015 and the implementation of the Colmery Act.

So, we are happy to make that decision once you have given us the information on the application and inform you of that, but there may be people that understand that and just don't apply.

Mr. *O'Rourke.* We are, God-willing, all going to be here a year from today, still in these same positions. What will we be likely talking about at that point if the Chairman decides to hold a hearing on this Forever GI Bill one year after the last hearing? Are we resolved on all these open issues? Do you have confidence that the 22 of 34 IT modifications will have been completed, the $70 million that you need to do this effectively spent, at least, for that part that has been budgeted?

What do you think we can anticipate a year from now?

General *Worley.* I would love, in a year from now, to certainly have all the letter issues squared away. I don't think—what I hope to say in a year—and Mr. Thrower can back me up on this—that we have done the work to get off the benefits delivery network—the 50-year-old benefits delivery network as a platform for paying and doing a number of other things with respect to education benefits, that Sections 107 and 501 are fully and purely and perfectly implemented.

We won't, in a year, be able to say that all the rest of those IT requirements are met, so I hope to be saying in a year that we have those funded and in a timeline that OIT is working through over the following year, but I will let Mr. Thrower comment on that.

Mr. THROWER. I think that is a pretty accurate statement. I think, you know, as I say, we are looking—we have been balancing priorities here. We started an effort before this Act was enacted to eliminate a major legacy problem within our environment. And so when this Act was—and, in fact, education services is the number one priority within OIT, as relates to the Veterans Benefits Administration in uplifting services.

Dealing with that legacy issue will provide us a great deal of agility to be able to make that kind of quick changes you are talking about long-term; we are trying to fix that. That will largely be done at the end of this fiscal year.

In the meantime, you know, what we will have published is we—and working together with General Worley and the education team, we identified those critical things that we absolutely had to do within an IT solution now——

Mr. *O'Rourke.* Yeah.

Mr. THROWER. —in order to make this work. And so we have integrated that within the same program that is doing the decommissioning work, which is a balance that we have to make to be able to do that.

We are looking very hard at managed-services solutions versus in-house development solutions. I will say that, you know, we are hoping that, say, October 1 of next year, we will have—well, next spring we will make a decision of which direction we wish to go. We will be in the throes of implementation of all of the other provisions a year from now, down the path that we will have determined in the spring and probably execute in the beginning of October.

Mr. *O'Rourke.* I appreciate that and thanks in advance for all the work that you are going to do on all that.

You know, I, for one, don't have the subject-matter expertise on all this, including the IT fix and other parts of the IT problems, and I just know from past experience that GAO has been so helpful to me in understanding and kind of providing a check and a third-party scrutiny on the commitments and the performance and I hope that we can get some help from GAO. Not in any way to say that I have a lack of confidence, because I don't—you all have been very helpful and very professional in implementing this—I just think given the group of veterans that we are talking about and the necessity of implementing this successfully, I just want to make sure that we have, you know, the greatest oversight possible that will help us to do our job.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for letting me go over my time.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Oh, absolutely.

I understand the doctor doesn't have any questions; is that right?

Okay. Then we will move to Mr. Correa; you are recognized for 5 minutes—no questions? Okay.

I have one question and then I am going to ask the Ranking Member if he wanted to make any more comments. The question is for Ms. Moakler. In your testimony, you described a situation where some students are demanding payment—the schools are demanding payment of tuition and fees and the VA has delayed in the payments, what have you. What can be done to address this issue so that students are not negatively impacted by school and VA delays?

Ms. MOAKLER. Well, what we are asking for are the protections for those receiving VA benefits that are already out there for those who are receiving Title IV benefits. So, if a Pell Grant payment is late, the student is not penalized. They can still go on. They can register for another semester of classes or what have you, because whatever certificate of eligibility they get for their Pell Grant is held as a receipt of payment, as it were.

But with the VA, many schools do not look at that certificate of eligibility as a payment. They want the payment in hand, and so that causes a hardship for my students.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Yes, so, give me an example of the hardship, because this is unbelievable. It is unacceptable that they——

Ms. MOAKLER. Because the——

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Tell me what is the penalty in a lot of cases.

Ms. MOAKLER. The student—the institution of higher learning will start dunning the student for payment and ask them to take out a loan to cover that period between when the university required the payment and when the VA makes the payment.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Yeah.

Ms. MOAKLER. And so, then, the student is stuck with those—that loan.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. And they have that added stress——

Ms. MOAKLER. They do.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. —which they should not have.

Ms. MOAKLER. They do.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. So, that is the real-life scenario and we have got to do something about that. So, I appreciate you answering the question.

Well, I want to ask the Ranking Member if he had any comments, otherwise——

Mr. *O'Rourke.* Mr. Chairman, I don't. Thank you for helping to hold the hearing today and thank you all for testifying and for answering all our questions.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Okay. If there are no other questions—anyone have any other questions? If there are no other questions, I want to thank the witnesses for their testimony, for answering all the questions.

We all understand the importance that the passage of this Forever GI Bill will have for future generations of veterans to come. We really did great work in this Committee and I thank the Chairman, the full-committee Chairman, as well, which is why it is so vital, again, it is so vital that we get implementation right the first time, as Ms. Rice said.

We will continue to work with the VA and receive regular updates on how the process is moving along. I ask you, General Worley and your staff to not hesitate, to let us know if you are lacking the resources that you need to get this right.

And we will also continue to work with the veterans, the groups like SVA and TAPS and rely on you. Please, we are relying on you to keep your ears on the ground and keep us abreast with any concerns you are hearing from the membership and as you work with VA in the coming months and years.

I would ask unanimous consent that all Members have 5 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous material. Without objection, so ordered.

Finally, I would like to publicly congratulate Mr. Hubbard on his promotion to the rank of staff sergeant in United States Marine Corps Reserves. Congratulations, sir.

Thank you, Mr. Hubbard, for your continued service to our country and semper fi.

This hearing is now adjourned. Thank you. I need the gavel—oh, here it is—thank you very much, appreciate it.

[Whereupon, at 3:15 p.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

Prepared Statement of Robert M. Worley II

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member O'Rourke, and other Members of the Subcommittee. I am Robert Worley, Director of Education Service, and I am pleased to be here with you today to discuss the implementation of the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017 (Colmery Act), or as it's more commonly referred to, the Forever GI Bill. Accompanying me today are Mr. Lloyd Thrower, Office of Information & Technology (OI&T), Account Manager, Benefits Portfolio, and Mrs. Charmain Bogue, Deputy Director, Education Service, Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA).

Colmery Act

On August 16, 2017, the President signed into law the Colmery Act (Public Law 115–48), which includes the most comprehensive changes to GI Bill benefits since enactment of the Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act (Post 9/11 GI Bill) in 2008. Specifically, the Colmery Act enhances access and availability to educational benefits for eligible Veterans through several technical adjustments, calls for investment in information technology (IT) systems, and fundamentally changes the way we view the GI Bill. The Colmery Act has become known as the Forever GI Bill because of its most recognized feature - the removal of the 15-year time limitation for Veterans who transitioned out of the military after January 1, 2013, and eligible dependents, to use their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits. The law also restores benefits to Veterans impacted by school closures since 2015, and expands benefits for certain Reservists, surviving dependents, and Purple Heart recipients among other improvements.

The importance and complexity of the Colmery Act led VA to establish a Program Executive Office (PEO) comprised of business-line managers, management analysts, individuals with program and project management experience, and contract support. The office is responsible for monitoring and coordinating all Forever GI Bill implementation activities. VA also awarded a 12-month Program Management contract in September to provide the PEO with expertise in IT, training, and communications.

Twenty-two of the law's thirty-four provisions require significant changes to our IT systems. OI&T is committed to providing a solution to the most pressing of these - Sections 107 and 501 - which change the way VA pays monthly housing stipends by aligning payment to the location where students physically attend the majority of their classes and removing the one percent reduction exemption on GI Bill stipends.

An IT solution for these sections is part of VA's commitment to continue automating the education claims process and delivering timely payments to Veterans and beneficiaries. The importance of this cannot be overstated - since fiscal year (FY) 2013, VA has processed an average of four million claims per year. In FY 2017, the average time to process all education claims was approximately 25 days for original claims and nine days for enrollment certifications.

To support the additional claims VA anticipates as a result of the Colmery Act, and to assist with the standing up of new initiatives like the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship, VA is establishing specialized teams with experienced claims processors and is reallocating more senior staff to account for increased workload. In addition, VA has begun hiring 200 temporary employees in the field who are expected to be on board by May 2018.

Date of Enactment Provisions

VA has taken significant steps in the four months since the Colmery Act was enacted to implement thirteen provisions that were effective immediately, and has begun a multifaceted outreach campaign to highlight and promote the changes to Veterans and beneficiaries.

In November, VA conducted extensive outreach through social and traditional media outlets. On November 19, VA held a Forever GI Bill Twitter Town Hall that reached over 170,000 users. VA has also been leveraging its GI Bill Facebook to share updates, highlighting the removal of the delimiting date for using Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits, its new authority to restore entitlement in the event of school closures, and the permanency of the work-study program. On the web, VA created a new site that is regularly updated with information, resources, and Frequently Asked Questions for provisions with the most immediate impact on Veterans and beneficiaries, such as the expansion of independent study programs.

VA sent two mass e-mails to 1.2 million stakeholders emphasizing what changes have been made, and what further changes are coming as additional provisions, including those giving Purple Heart recipients full entitlement to the Post 9/11 GI Bill and extending the Yellow Ribbon Program to Purple Heart and Fry Scholarship recipients, go in effect on August 1, 2018. VA briefed stakeholders such as School Certifying Officials and representatives from Veterans Service Organizations on the Colmery Act and encouraged them to help VA get the word out about GI Bill enhancements. On November 29, VBA's Deputy Under Secretary for Economic Opportunity conducted interviews with 23 radio and TV stations reaching millions of viewers. By all accounts, the interviews were positive and well received. These interviews presented yet another opportunity to discuss the Colmery Act and its impact on Veterans and beneficiaries, and also encouraged all interested Veterans and dependents to contact VA for more information on Education benefits.

VA had already started working on those provisions taking effect upon enactment, so that Veterans and beneficiaries could take advantage of the expanded benefits. VA also notified nearly 8,000 beneficiaries that they may be potentially eligible for restoration of entitlement under a Special Application provision. To date, VA has received and processed over 250 applications and restored entitlement to 192 beneficiaries. VA is committed to restoring entitlement to all eligible Veterans and beneficiaries and encourages those who may be eligible to apply at www.benefits.va.gov/GIBILL/ForeverGIBill.asp.

VA has started to notify nearly 3,200 Veterans, who lost their Reserve Educational Assistance Program (REAP) eligibility due to the program's sunset, that they now have the option to make an irrevocable election to have their eligible active duty service periods used to establish Post-9/11 GI Bill eligibility. Affected Veterans are receiving information and guidance on what the election means to their benefit entitlement and future use, and are given the option to have VA contact them if they need further assistance before making an election.

The most notable and recognized change by the Colmery Act is the removal of the 15-year time limitation to use the GI Bill benefit. This is a powerful statement to millions of Veterans that education and training is the key to their economic future today and tomorrow. Recognizing this, VA OI&T is working closely with Education Service to review and update all outgoing letters and material that features a delimiting date, so that Veterans and beneficiaries are properly informed of the lifetime benefit.

VA also performed a data analysis of Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry Scholarship recipients, and found that three beneficiaries in FY 2017 and eight in FY 2018 would no longer see that entitlement expire as a result of the Colmery Act. VA contacted each of these individuals to explain the steps to continue to use this benefit.

The provisions mentioned above were the most impactful to Veterans and beneficiaries, but numerous others also required immediate VA action. VA is still assessing the provision concerning the amount to provide State Approving Agencies (SAAs), and will support the GAO study on SAA funding and approvals. VA has also notified SAAs that they may authorize independent study programs at certain educational institutions that are not institutions of higher learning, like career and technical education schools.

In November, VA announced 12 new members to its Veterans Advisory Committee on Education, to be chaired by former U.S. Senator James H. Webb and co-chaired by Jared Lyon, the President and Chief Executive Officer of Student Veterans of America. The Colmery Act extends the Committee's authority to FY 2022.

VA is compiling and analyzing data on student progress and will soon deliver an implementation plan outlining IT system improvements to maximize the automation of educational claims processing.

In order to provide information on whether schools offer priority enrollment to Veterans, Digital Services is partnering with Education Service to collect school data for display on the GI Bill Comparison Tool.

VA's Compensation Service has also identified an initial group of Veterans that may now be eligible for disability compensation because of full-body exposure to ni-

trogen mustard gas or lewisite during World War II, and is establishing a workgroup to process these claims.

A few provisions of the Colmery Act align with policies and procedures already in place. Examples include codification of the VetSuccess on Campus program, allowing Veterans participating in the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program to extend eligibility if called to active duty in certain cases, and providing School Certifying Officials additional flexibility when a course start date does not align with that of an academic term.

Looking Ahead

VA is working hard to successfully implement the Colmery Act in a prudent and timely manner, but a great deal of work remains with 18 of the 34 provisions. VA has already started revising regulations, articulating communications plans, and building operational models toward smooth and functional implementation.

VA looks forward to continuing to work with Members of this Committee and the Congress on these efforts.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee today. We look forward to responding to any questions from you and Members of the Committee.

Prepared Statement of William Hubbard

Chairman Arrington, Ranking Member O'Rourke and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit our testimony on the modernization of the GI Bill and other pending legislation. With nearly 1,500 chapters representing over 1.1 million student veterans in schools across the country, we are pleased to share the perspective of those directly impacted by the subjects before 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 on 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, fostering the success of veterans in school is paramount in their preparation for productive and impactful lives following service in the military.

Signed into law on August 16th, 2017, H.R. 3218-commonly known as the Forever GI Bill-made [1]history[2]. As one of the most significant pieces of higher education legislation to occur this century, millions of service-affiliated students will have greater access to education and training thanks to the efforts of this Committee and the 115th Congress. We would like to share some brief history and intent of the legislation from our perspective, which was truly a case-study in partnership and bipartisan discussion. In 2016, Student Veterans of America recognized the importance of sustainability in programs driven by outcomes, and fueled with data-driven decision-making.

Last year, we saw that it was time to stop playing defense against budget threats on the GI Bill, and instead to protect it for all generations of veterans to come. We acknowledge that student veterans are among the most successful students in higher education today. Based on our research, the National Veteran Education Success Tracker (NVEST)[3], we demonstrated that the investment our country is making in the education of veterans has an incredible impact on all service-affiliated students, as well as the Nation's ability to maintain global leadership.

The Forever GI Bill includes dozens of solution-oriented provisions such as work-study authorization; science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) scholarships; removal of the time limit; and many others which increase access to education. The new law also addresses inequities of this earned benefit and looks forward to the future well beyond our own generation. We are proud to have played a part in advocating for its passage. We have entered a new era of education for veterans-one where we no longer consider the GI Bill as a "cost of war", but more powerfully a right of service.

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[1] 115th Congress (2017). HR 3218, https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/3218

[2] Gross, Natalie (2017). Military Times. "Trump signed the 'Forever GI Bill.' Here are 11 things you should know", https://www.militarytimes.com/education-transition/education/2017/08/16/trump-signed-the-forever-gi-bill-here-are-11-things-you-should-know/

[3] Cate, C. A., Lyon, J. S., Schmeling, J., & Bogue, B. Y. (2017). National Veteran Education Success Tracker: A report on the academic success of student-veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Washington, D.C.

The bill was frequently referred to as one of the most bipartisan pieces of legislation ever to pass through congress, both in co-sponsorship and votes, as well as formulation and negotiated text. We also must acknowledge a special thanks to the following organizations that composed the "Tiger Team" who worked closely with the Veterans Affairs Committees in making the passage of this bill a reality: Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion, Vietnam Veterans of America, Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, Got Your 6, and the Military Order of the Purple Heart.

As leading advocates for the bill, we are committed to the complete and timely implementation of the law. With that interest in mind, we thank the Committee for this opportunity to highlight several key areas of success, as well as some areas with room for improvement. We applaud the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and their dedicated staff for demonstrating great initiative in implementing the Forever GI Bill, especially their very public communications effort to make those affected aware of upcoming opportunities.

- Prior Gaps in Access. There were several key components of the Forever GI Bill aimed at addressing critical gaps in education benefits for those who earned them, but were not eligible due to various bureaucratic nuances. Four populations were identified that required specific changes to address these gaps, including Purple Heart recipients, Fry Scholarship recipients, National Guard and reserve members with 12304b orders, and students of closed schools.

We anticipate coordination between the Department of Defense (DoD) and VA on exchanging a database of Purple Heart recipients to be cross-referenced with current GI Bill eligibility, with a targeted communications effort to follow. We maintain concern over the validity of the contact information for those affected, and encourage VA to work closely with the Military Order of the Purple Heart-also an original Tiger Team member-in messaging this new change [4].

Two commonsense solutions in the law include affording Fry Scholarship recipients access the Yellow Ribbon Program and benefits eligibility for National Guard and reserve members who served under 12340b orders. In both instances, a change to the IT rules may be necessary, though we anticipate some manual processing of these individual cases. We strongly encourage VA to consider automating these benefits to avoid any delays once the changes go into effect by August 1, 2018.

Until Forever GI Bill, student veterans attending schools with unexpected closures were the only students in higher education with no reasonable recourse to recoup their benefits. The most prolific examples included the closure of the Corinthian Colleges and ITT [5]Tech [6]. Unfortunately, thousands of student veterans were adversely affected due to the poor performance of these schools, and we applaud VA for producing an application for these students to apply for restoration of their benefits.

We are concerned that so few students have applied for the restoration of benefits under the school closure provision since the notice from VA went live to these students [7]. Similar to our concerns with reaching eligible Purple Heart recipients, the integrity of contact information within the VA system may not be reliable. We encourage VA to partner with external organizations such as Student Veterans of America and others to reach the widest audience possible.

- Edith Norse Rogers STEM Scholarship. This provision originated from H.R. 5784 in the 113th congress, the GI Bill STEM Extension Act, a bipartisan bill co-sponsored by Rep. David McKinley (WV–1) and Rep. Dina Titus (NV–1). [8] We were a proud partner in the formulation and advocacy of this effort, and are pleased to see it as a law. At present, the implementation of this provision is unknown, despite being one of the most high-profile provisions. Student veterans consistently cite this as a component of Forever GI Bill with which they have the greatest interest.

We encourage this Committee to pay special attention to the implementation of this provision, as it represents one of the most significant contiguous investment of

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[4] Military Order of the Purple Hear, http://www.purpleheart.org/Mission.aspx

[5] Hefling, Kimberly. POLITICO, (2015). "Vets snared in for-profit college collapse want GI Bill money back". https://www.politico.com/story/2015/07/veterans-gi-bill-for-profit-colleges-119697

[6] Absher, Jim. Military.Com (2016). "ITT Tech Closes All Campuses, Affecting Nearly 7,000 Veterans". https://www.military.com/daily-news/2016/09/06/itt-tech-closes-all-campuses-affecting-nearly-7000-veterans.html

[7] VA estimates that approximately 250 of the roughly 7,000 potentially affected students have applied to have their benefits restored.

[8] 113th Congress (2014). H.R. 5784, https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/house-bill/5784/cosponsors

resources in the new law. Additionally, the long-term return on investment of this provision has the potential to impact our country's overall national security posture, with STEM-educated professionals needed now more than ever. [9]

- Modernizing Through Innovation. We worked closely with House Majority Leader, Rep. Kevin McCarthy (CA–23) and his office to support the inclusion of this provision. Today, higher education as an industry is not reacting to the changes in modern technology, and adapting to a new generation of students which are a majority non-traditional learners. Some sectors of the industry have adapted quicker than others, while many schools lag behind.

This provision represents a recognition that innovation in higher education must be in concert with new technologies, and with a focus on the future economy. We anticipate VA publishing a solicitation for bids to contract the education providers afforded under this provision. We offer our support to VA on the development of criteria to determine the selection of those contractors, noting the potential for bad actors to have a high interest in participating in this program. We encourage VA to identify rigorous standards that prevent poor quality providers from participating.

- One GI Bill for All Generations. When we first conceived of the idea of one GI Bill for all future generations of veterans, we did it with the intent of protecting the long-term viability of the program. We heavily encourage this Committee and congress to make data-driven decisions based on the return on investment of all government programs. From the original implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill to-date, student veterans have demonstrated that they are some of the most high-performing students in higher education today, highlighted by their record 72% success rate. [10]

One of the first organizations we approached with the concept of the Forever GI Bill was Vietnam Veterans of America, who's core motto, "Never again will one generation of veterans abandon another" resonating strongly with us. [11] We believe the removal of the 15-year limit helps to secure this benefit for future generations, and encourage VA to require all outgoing Certificates of Eligibility (CoE) to reflect the removal of the delimiting date. No veteran should receive a certificate with a time limit on their benefits if they are eligible for the "Forever" provision.

- Overall Implementation Concerns. As the Forever GI Bill was being developed, it became increasingly clear that implementation costs, particularly IT changes and upgrades, would be a significant driver of cost. We applaud Rep. Gus Bilirakis for proposing the inclusion of a $30 million authorization for VA to make the necessary changes. [12] More recent estimates for the full implementation of the law are approximately $70 million [13]. We have major concerns on whether or not the offices implementing this law are receiving adequate resources to execute this overhaul.

As a function of VA's structure, the IT budget is a single consolidated resource, often leaving comparatively smaller programs without the resources needed to serve their customers as effectively as they desire. This highlights a long-standing challenge in maintaining the Office of Economic Opportunity under the Veterans Benefits Administration, and is worth consideration for an Under Secretary-level representation within VA. Our major interest is in avoiding processing and payment delays similar to those that occurred in 2009, and we look forward to working with VA and this Committee on supporting timely implementation of this law.

The Forever GI Bill represents a significant shift in education for veterans, and in higher education in general. More important than inputs and outputs are outcomes-that is more apparent today than ever; the GI Bill is an American success story because it has demonstrated results. As President Thomas Jefferson said in 1808, "The same prudence which in private life would forbid our paying our own

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[9] Coleman, Kevin. C4ISRnet (2017), "Is the STEM shortage a national security issue?". https://www.c4isrnet.com/opinion/the-compass/net-defense-blogs/2017/04/17/is-the-stem-shortage-a-national-security-issue/

[10] Cate, C. A., Lyon, J. S., Schmeling, J., & Bogue, B. Y. (2017). National Veteran Education Success Tracker: A report on the academic success of student-veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Washington, D.C.

[11] Vietnam Veterans of America, https://vva.org/who-we-are/about-us-history/

[12] 115th Congress (2017). H.R. 1994, https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/1994

[13] Estimated total cost of implementation based on discussions with senior VA officials.

money for unexplained projects, forbids it in the dispensation of the public moneys." [14]

In some instances, such as the high cost of low quality flight schools, those outcomes have come into question. [15] While many flight schools deliver high quality programs, several predatory programs have used the contract loophole to exploit veterans for their GI Bill tuition. With the implementation of Forever GI Bill, we raise the question, "who should be allowed to play in GI Bill land?"; consider the precedent of the VA home loan program-many banks do not qualify for these loans due to the rigorous and strict standards, leading to outcomes impressive by any standard.

Furthermore, there have been schools with poor outcomes declared unapproved by State Approving Agencies such as Ashford University. [16] The measure of whether or not schools should be allowed to participate in this GI Bill of the future should be outcomes. Student veterans view approval for VA funding as a declaration of academic quality, which it presently is not. We respectfully request that this Committee host an informal roundtable discussion on several of these topics identified in this testimony early in 2018. We would hope to address several of our concerns in greater detail, with the opportunity to further research some of the topics identified in this hearing.

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

Prepared Statement of Moakler

Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors

The Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) is the national nonprofit organization providing compassionate care for the families of America's fallen military heroes. TAPS provides peer-based emotional support, grief and trauma resources, grief seminars and retreats for adults, Good Grief Camps for children, casework assistance, connections to community-based care, online and in-person support groups and a 24/7 resource and information helpline for all who have been affected by a death in the Armed Force. Services are provided free of charge.

TAPS was founded in 1994 by Bonnie Carroll following the death of her husband in a military plane crash in Alaska in 1992. Since then, TAPS has offered comfort and care to more than 70,000 bereaved surviving family members. For more information, please visit www.TAPS.org.

TAPS currently receives no government grants or funding.

Kathleen Moakler

Kathleen joined TAPS in 2015 and is honored to work with America's frontline resource offering compassionate care for all those grieving a death in the Armed Forces. She works with policy makers as well as military and veteran advocacy organizations to ensure that surviving families' benefits and support services are protected and surviving families receive the most up-to-date information on any changes to their benefits. Kathleen comes to TAPS with 20 years of military family advocacy experience including protecting and enhancing surviving military family benefits, serving as past co-chair of the Survivor Program Committee for the Military Coalition, sitting on the DoD/VA Survivors Forum, and testifying numerous times before Congress on behalf of surviving military families. She also represented military families on the Congressionally-mandated Department of Defense (DoD) Military Family Readiness Council.

An active duty and retired Army spouse for over 40 years, she holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration from the State University of New York at Albany. Mrs. Moakler was honored to receive the Gold Star Wives of America 2015 Award of Excellence. Parents of three adult children and grandparents to two

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[14] Washington, Henry. (1859) Joint Committee of Congress on the Library, "The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Correspondence". Pg 301, https://play.google.com/books/reader?printsec=frontcover&output=reader&id=RixNn3jbISYC&pg=GBS.PR1

[15] Haress, Chris. (2016), International Business Times. http://www.ibtimes.com/gi-bill-flight-school-benefits-could-be-slashed-congress-amid-tuition-loophole-2294612

[16] Halperin, David. (2017), HuffPost. "Bridgepoint SEC Filing Raises Questions About Continued Federal Funding". https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/bridgepoint-sec-filing-raises-questions-about-continued—us—5a0b3a78e4b06d8966cf3318

military kids, Kathleen and her husband, Colonel Martin W. Moakler Jr. USA (retired), reside in Alexandria, Virginia.

Chairman Arrington, Ranking Member O'Rourke and distinguished members of the Economic Opportunity Subcommittee of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) thanks you for the opportunity to make you aware of issues and concerns of importance to the families we serve, the families of the fallen.

While the mission of TAPS is to offer comfort and support for surviving families, we are also committed to improving support provided by the Federal government through the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Department of Education (DoED), state governments and local communities for the families of the fallen—those who fall in combat, those who fall from invisible wounds and those who die from illness or disease.

TAPS appreciates the attention the Committee has paid to making sure that veterans and surviving family members have access to quality education. Surviving family members using their education benefits often face many of the same challenges facing all students. TAPS is proud to work with other organizations, including the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Veterans Education Success and Student Veterans of America to ensure safeguards are in place to protect all recipients of education benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Education.

Indicative of the specialized support that TAPS provides is the education portal and individualized support on the education benefits available for the children and spouses of America's fallen heroes. TAPS staff members work with each individual to maximize the financial support they can receive to complete their education from both government and private agencies.

We are most appreciative of the opportunity to comment on implementation of the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017.

TAPS would like to recognize the outstanding support we receive from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) on behalf of the survivors we serve. For several years we were honored to have a Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) with the education specialists in the office of Economic Opportunity in the Veterans Benefits Administration enabling TAPS and the VA to work most efficiently in solving problems that surviving spouses and children encountered while accessing their VA education benefits. This relationship also allowed the VA to discover areas where policy or procedural processes could be improved so they could serve survivors more effectively.

The VA Office of Survivor Assistance, including director Moira Flanders and her staff, works closely with TAPS to answer questions and concerns that are raised by surviving family members. We also appreciate the opportunities provided by the DoD/VA Survivors Forum, held quarterly, which works as a clearinghouse for information on government and private sector programs and policies affecting surviving families. This is ably facilitated by Craig Zaroff of the VA Benefits Assistance Service.

TAPS was recently honored to enter into a new and expanded Memorandum of Agreement with the Department of Veterans Affairs. This agreement formalizes what has been a long-standing, informal working relationship between TAPS and the VA. The services provided by TAPS and VA are complimentary, and in this public-private partnership each will continue to provide extraordinary services through closer collaboration.

Under this agreement, TAPS continues to work with surviving families to identify resources available to them both within the VA and through private sources. TAPS will also collaborate with the VA in the areas of education, burial, benefits and entitlements, grief counseling and other areas of interest.

Implementation Challenges

We have heard from many of TAPS surviving spouses concerning the implementation of the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017. While they are most appreciative of the enhanced benefit, many have encountered stumbling blocks. We will outline these here.

Delimitating Date

The Delimitating Date is the date found on a VA Certificate Of Eligibility (COE) that informs the individual of the date they are no longer eligible for education benefits. Presently the certificate reads "you have until X date to use your benefits, under this program which is 15 years from the date of death of the service member." As of early December, eligible students are still receiving the letters with the 15-year delimitating date. While some students are aware of the delimitation date, they

are reluctant to actualize their education plan until they have the correct information on their certificate of eligibility.

TAPS did query the VA Office of Economic Opportunity about this discrepancy. The office offered that while IT upgrades are in process, the system does not currently allow the letter to go out without a delimitating date. To correct this problem, the VA Office of Economic Opportunity has taken several steps:

- Enhanced training to call center personnel to assure eligible recipients that indeed there is no delimitating date
- Sending letters informing spouses that have previously applied that there is no delimitating date
- Manually changing new certificates of eligibility until they find a permanent solution.

We are appreciative that VA has heard our concerns about this issue and are in the process for coming up with long-term solutions to support surviving families.

Surviving Spouse Michelle Fitz-Henry told us:

I am incredibly grateful for the successes we have had in the Forever GI Bill and the hard work that was done to include all surviving spouses. This bill has been a life-changing benefit for me. I am currently enrolled in school and feel privileged to be given this opportunity. The benefit of education will afford me financial stability.

Currently my Certificate of Eligibility has a delimiting date. I understand that surviving spouses, under the Forever GI Bill, are now able to use this benefit without fear of it running out before they can attend or finish their degrees. I have some decisions to make in the very near future but am concerned that the only documentation that I have shows that this benefit will expire in the not too distant future. I do believe that this could be a stumbling block. I have called the VA and my personal experience is that not all representatives are familiar with the changes for families of the fallen. I do recognize that the VA is a large institution and that many changes occur for many different groups of veterans, active duty, and survivors and it takes time to educate everyone.

I would feel much more secure in planning out my education strategy if I had documentation to present to the school showing that I have no delimiting date.

IT Support

The success of the implementation of the "Forever GI Bill" by the VA is dependent upon the updating of the VA information technology system. As mentioned above, something as simple as the elimination of the delimitating date is entirely dependent on changes to the IT system. We know this is in process by the VA. We hope there will be appropriate funding to expedite this process.

Getting the word out

The more survivors know about their benefits, the better they are equipped to make informed decisions. We would like to see what the VA's communication plan is to publicize and inform veterans and survivors about changes to their benefits as a result of the "Forever GI Bill."

While mandatory training for school certifying officials is included in the "Forever GI Bill" schools, we are concerned about the institutions of higher learning (IHLs) being aware of the changes coming in August 2018. We know that the Office of Economic Opportunity is pushing out information to IHLs. We hope there will be coordination within the IHLs so that the person actually talking to the student is aware of the changes.

Suggestions for further improvement

TAPS biggest concern with all the changes being implemented on August 1, 2018, is that there will be delayed payments and processing time for payments for veterans and survivors enrolled for the fall 2018 semester.

Even with the few changes that went into effect this fall, TAPS had issues with institutions of higher learning demanding payment from the student because of delayed VA payments. Students receiving VA payments were not allowed to attend classes, register for Spring 2018 or use campus facilities (library, health center) because the VA payment was delayed. In some cases, students were put on payment plans they could not afford or forced to take out student loans with egregious origination fees in order to continue the education program.

TAPS would recommend that students receiving VA payments have the same protections as those who receive Title IV funding such as Pell Grants and Federal student loans. These Title IV students are allowed to attend classes, participate in

extra-curricular activities and use campus facilities, as long as the IHL knows that payment will arrive.

TAPS strongly believes that the best way to do this is through a legislative change. We have been in discussion with the House Veterans Affairs Committee, majority staff to assist these students.

The proposed legislation would give the Secretary of Veterans Affairs the ability to disapprove any course of education unless the educational institutions providing the course permits individuals to attend or participate in courses pending payment by the VA and accepts a Certificate of Eligibility as a promise of payment.

The Way Ahead

Continued cooperation between the VA, the Committee and interested VSOs, MSOs and survivor advocates is essential to make the implementation of the "Forever GI Bill" a success. TAPS will continue to provide feedback to both the VA and the Committee on the experience of survivors.

Questions and Answers For The Record

Honorable David J. Shulkin M.D. to VA

December 14th, 2017

The Honorable David J. Shulkin M.D.
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary:

In reference to our Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity Hearing entitled, "An Update on the Implementation of the Forever GI Bill, the Harry W. Colmery Educational Assistance Act of 2017 on December 12th, 2017, I would appreciate it if you could answer the enclosed hearing questions by the close of business on January 19th, 2017.

Committee practice permits the hearing record to remain open to permit Members to submit additional questions to the witnesses. Attached are additional questions directed to you.

In preparing your answers to these questions, please provide your answers consecutively and single-spaced and include the full text of the question you are addressing in bold font. To facilitate the printing of the hearing record, please e-mail your response in a Word document, to Chris Bennett at Cluistopher.Bennett @mai l.house.gov by the close of business on January 19th, 2017. Ifyou have any questions please contact him at 202–225–9756.

Sincerely,

TIM WALZ
Ranking Member

Answers to Questions for the Record of the Hearing

1. Please provide project management documents and timelines laying out the decisions that need to be made in order for on-time implementation of all of the provisions in the Colmery GI Bill, when they need to be made, and expected implementation dates.

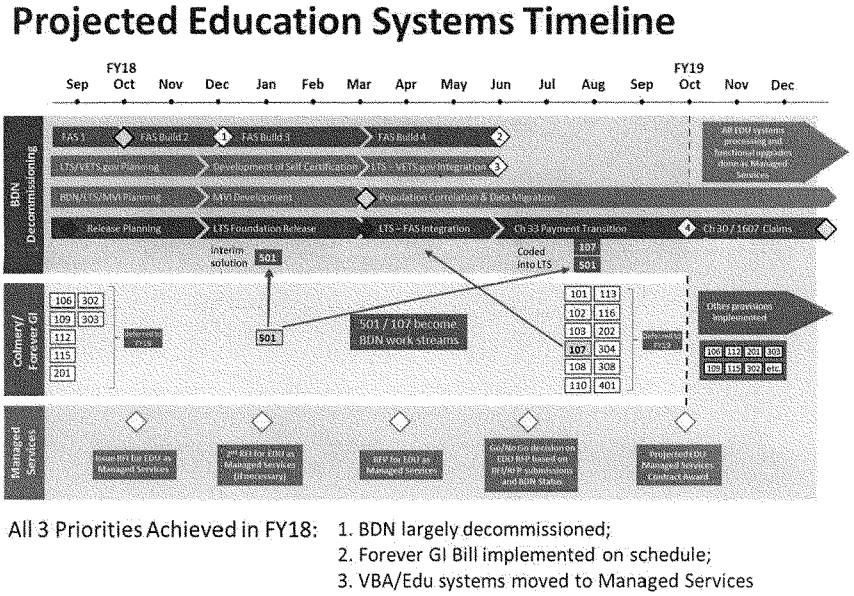
VA Response: The Colmery Act Program Executive Office (PEO) is working on a project management plan to ensure on-time implementation of all provisions. The project plan will capture all relevant tasks, milestones, deadlines, and dependencies for the operational, policy, information technology (IT), and communications requirements involved with each section, and will be updated as items progress. The PEO expects a draft plan by the end of January 2018.

In terms of IT, fully satisfying all Colmery Act provisions will be a balance of meeting the most critical needs-Sections 501 and 107-in fiscal year (FY) 2018, coupled with a number of manually enabled processes. The Office of Information and Technology (OI&T) will implement Sections 501 and 107 alongside the Benefits Delivery Network (BDN) Decommissioning effort as a separate work stream. As noted

in the response to question 7a below, in FY 2018, VA is implementing changes regarding the delimiting dates in award letters.

Implementation of all other provisions in IT systems are planned for FY 2019 after the bulk of BDN Decommissioning is complete.

The following high-level milestones (page 2) reflect current planning efforts overlaid with BDN decommissioning and other Education initiatives for managed services.



All 3 Priorities Achieved in FY18:
1. BDN largely decommissioned;
2. Forever GI Bill implemented on schedule;
3. VBA/Edu systems moved to Managed Services

2. Will the manual workarounds in the current system, in lieu of the larger IT overhaul that will not happen until 2019, impact the timeliness of benefits processing for the upcoming implementation deadlines?

VA response: VA expects that the manual workarounds in development and the additional temporary Full Time Equivalent (FTE) hires will keep benefits processing timeliness consistent with recent performance. OI&T is committed to providing a solution to the most impactful provisions-Sections 107 and 501-by August 1, 2018.

a. Will the manual workarounds allow full implementation of the August 1st, 2018 provisions?

VA response: VA expects its efforts, which also include providing job aids and detailed procedural advisories to Education Service staff, will allow the August 1, 2018 provisions to be implemented on-time.

i. Is this response based on analyses that VA has done about the likely number of applicants for the various new provisions?

VA Response: Yes. An analysis, including estimated changes to beneficiary volume, informed the implementation plan.

b. How does VA plan to guarantee that every new processing procedure will be ready by August 1st, 2018?

VA response: PEO is working closely with OI&T to provide staff the resources to process claims and work related to Colmery Act provisions. This includes short-term solutions by way of manual workarounds, job aids, and training plans to a long-term planning that includes modernizing Education Service processing system platforms.

i. What are the interim targets VA needs to meet to ensure that the August 1st, 2018 deadline is met?

VA response: PEO is collaborating with a project management contractor on a comprehensive project plan, which includes dependencies and timelines. In parallel,

development of user stories and business requirements is on-going to support implementation of provisions effective as of August 1, 2018.

c. If one or more of these workarounds do not work, does VA have contingency plans in place to ensure full, on-time implementation of the August 1st, 2018 provisions?

VA response: As each workaround completes development, it is subject to thorough testing based on processing scenarios and, once implemented, a quality and production tracker is established to identify and rectify any defects. These risk control measures allow VA to make adjustments and correct issues that may present themselves post-implementation.

d. Once VA receives the necessary appropriated funds for the large IT overhaul in 2019, when does VA expect to have the system operational so that manual workarounds are no longer needed?

i. Has VA done an analysis and/or otherwise planned for the possibility that the manual workarounds might need to be in place for some time?

VA response: Several critical pieces will be implemented within the Long Term Solution system in FY 2018–Sections 107 and 501, along with adjustments to award letters that ensure Veterans do not receive incorrect information about the expiration of benefits. These achievements will allow VA to ensure all Colmery Act provisions will be implemented on-time (in some instances with manual workarounds) while VA decommissions the BDN system which currently handles most Education claims processing and payments.

Specific timing of additional systems updates beyond FY 2018 has yet to be determined, though VA hopes to have all provisions implemented with IT solutions by the end of FY 2019. VA is actively exploring the possibility of delivering Education benefits through managed services or a managed IT solution. VA recently issued a Request for Information on this topic and responses are being evaluated. Based on what VA learns, the Department will make a decision this spring as to which avenue (standard development, managed IT solution, managed business service) to pursue. Implementation of all remaining Colmery Act provisions will be a requirement regardless of the path chosen. VA expects implementation of the selected course to begin in the last quarter of calendar year 2018.

3. What analyses did VA do to determine that it needed 200 temporary employees for the upcoming deadlines?

VA Response: A provision-by-provision analysis to estimate workload, including claimants and process changes, concluded that 200 temporary employees were needed.

a. When do all of these employees need to be on board in order to meet VA's implementation goals?

VA Response: 27 employees are expected on board in January with the remainder by May 2018.

b. How does VA plan to assess whether it may need to hire more employees prior to the deadline?

VA Response: As VA better understands the associated workload, we will continue to assess and make necessary adjustments within existing authority and resources as required.

c. Are there checkpoints built in over the coming months when such assessments can take place?

VA Response: Yes, as provisions are implemented, VA will assess workload at regular intervals.

4. What methods has VA used to get the word out about the new provisions in the GI Bill?

VA Response: VA has taken a multi-faceted approach to promote the Colmery Act to Veterans and beneficiaries. This includes an extensive social media campaign with regular posts on Facebook, a Twitter Town Hall, a satellite media tour that reached an audience of over 3 million, new Web sites (https://www.benefits.va.gov/GIBILL/forevergibill.asp and https://benefits.va.gov/gibill/fgib/restoration.asp), and posting Frequently Asked Questions (https://gibill.custhelp.com/app/answers/list) for provisions with the most immediate impact on Veterans and beneficiaries.

a. Is VA sending targeted notifications to individual veterans?

VA Response: Yes, VA has sent targeted notifications to individuals impacted by Sections 109 and 106 and will continue to do so for other provisions, when appropriate. This will include outreach to Purple Heart recipients and those no longer impacted by the 15-year delimiting date for the Post 9/11 GI Bill benefit.

b. Has VA also sent veterans e-Benefit or email notifications, in addition to traditional mail?

VA Response: E-mail notifications were sent to individuals impacted by Sections 109 and 106 and three email missives (https://www.benefits.va.gov/GIBILL/FGIBCommunications.asp) were sent on the Colmery Act, with additional resources and contact information, to over 1.2 million individuals.

c. Does VA believe it would be feasible to also call individual veterans?

VA Response: VA does not have the capacity to call all individual Veterans, but includes call center information prominently in its outreach material, and encourages anyone with questions or concerns to contact VA. In addition, the wide use of social media is a key element of our outreach strategy.

d. How is VA measuring the effectiveness its outreach and messaging?

VA Response: The multi-faceted approach to promote the Colmery Act was done to reach the largest audience as possible who may engage with VA in different ways (i.e. online, social media, traditional media). VA has also coordinated messaging with Veterans Service Organizations and other stakeholders to further its reach. VA tracks metrics for outreach efforts and if low response/participation rates are identified outreach strategies are reassessed.

5. VA testified that it sent 8,000 notification letters to student veterans who were affected by school closings and may be eligible for restored benefits. What percentage of the 8,000 students does VA expect to apply for restored benefits, and why?

VA Response: VA is committed to restoring benefits to all eligible Veterans and is closely monitoring the receipt of applications and processing to inform potential future follow-ups to those who have not applied. As time progresses and additional data is collected and analyzed, VA will be better able to gauge expected rates and the reasons why some Veterans may not seek restoration at a point in time.

a. If applications from these students increase, will the manual processing system be ready to handle the increased workload?

VA Response: Yes, 27 claims processors are trained to work these claims.

b. As of the date of the hearing, 250 students out of 8,000 have applied for restored benefits.

i. Does VA believe this ratio is on track with what it expected in terms of numbers of people applying for restoration?

VA Response: As of December 22, 2017, VA received over 450 applications and continues to provide outreach on entitlement restoration, with the intention to do so for all eligible Veterans. Given that this authority is new, VA has no baseline to compare ratios against, but is collecting and analyzing data to make those determinations in the future.

ii. Is VA able to track and account for eligible students who have transferred their credits (partially or fully) to another educational institution?

VA Response: No, this is not data VA collects.

6. What is the current amount of funding that VA estimates it will need appropriated next year in order for it to meet all of the Colmery GI Bill provision implementation deadlines?

VA Response: VA's initial scoring estimate, by section based on anticipated level of effort, was approximately $70 million. Since that time, noting the criticality of Sections 107 and 501, as well as new lessons learned during implementation, the existing FY 2018 funding fully support these requirements. The forthcoming President's Budget will provide additional details on resource needs for FY 2019.

7. Regarding the Certificates of Eligibility that are currently being sent out with incorrect 15-year delimiting deadlines:

a. Please detail why it is expected to take several months to change the technical code that allows the VA to send out Certificates of Eligibility without deadlines.

VA Response: VA Education Service manually processes all original Certificate of Eligibility letters and those are now being released with a correct description of the claimant's delimiting date. As of December 19, 2017, all manual "award letters" are also being released with a correct delimiting date.

Letters generated through automated processing continue to show a delimiting date because the processing system currently creates a delimiting date for all Post-9/11 GI Bill recipients, and the "rules engine" uses the same data elements to make automated processing determinations. Changes to these dates require changes to program logic that calculate them based on Veteran characteristics and subsequent eligibility determinations of applicants. It is important to note these letters are not simply form letters, but are comprised of sections which are programmatically determined based on various business rules acting on the Veteran's data. Moreover, the process in which these letters are produced is a shared program module among a number of education chapters and not just those affected by the provisions of the Colmery Act. Care must be taken in the translation of this subpopulation's requirements in addition to the existing eligibility workflows to ensure other education benefit determinations are not inadvertently broken so as to result in erroneous information or other impact to Veteran benefits.

In addition, there are non-technical considerations that will add time to the quality assurance of resulting system changes. For example, the same resources performing the testing also process claims and, at present, VA is entering into the peak enrollment period for Spring enrollments, which limits the number of resources available for requirements and testing.

b. Please provide a detailed plan for how VA is going to fix this date issue on Certificates of Eligibility, including timelines.

VA Response: On December 19, 2017, VA implemented the process to correct the delimiting date on the Certificates of Eligibility, and from this point forward these documents show the correct delimiting date, if any.

c. Please list and describe the proactive and preventative steps VA is currently taking to minimize confusion over this issue until the correct Certificates of Eligibility will be sent out.

VA Response: VA expects to send an email notification to impacted beneficiaries by January 31, 2018, and has leveraged Facebook, Twitter, mass e-mails, web postings, and briefed stakeholders on what the delimiting date removal means and to whom it applies.

