AUTHENTICATED
U.S. GOVERNMENT
INFORMATION
GPO

EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF VA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AND EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

TUESDAY, JUNE 4, 2019

Serial No. 116–14

Printed for the use of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Available via the World Wide Web: http://www.govinfo.gov

U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING OFFICE

40–764 WASHINGTON : 2021

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

MARK TAKANO, California, *Chairman*

JULIA BROWNLEY, California
KATHLEEN M. RICE, New York
CONOR LAMB, Pennsylvania, *Vice-Chairman*
MIKE LEVIN, California
MAX ROSE, New York
CHRIS PAPPAS, New Hampshire
ELAINE G. LURIA, Virginia
SUSIE LEE, Nevada
JOE CUNNINGHAM, South Carolina
GILBERT RAY CISNEROS, JR., California
COLLIN C. PETERSON, Minnesota
GREGORIO KILILI CAMACHO SABLAN, Northern Mariana Islands
COLIN Z. ALLRED, Texas
LAUREN UNDERWOOD, Illinois
ANTHONY BRINDISI, New York

DAVID P. ROE, Tenessee, *Ranking Member*
GUS M. BILIRAKIS, Florida
AUMUA AMATA COLEMAN RADEWAGEN, American Samoa
MIKE BOST, Illinois
NEAL P. DUNN, Florida
JACK BERGMAN, Michigan
JIM BANKS, Indiana
ANDY BARR, Kentucky
DANIEL MEUSER, Pennsylvania
STEVE WATKINS, Kansas
CHIP ROY, Texas
W. GREGORY STEUBE, Florida

RAY KELLEY, *Democratic Staff Director*
JON TOWERS, *Republican Staff Director*

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

MIKE LEVIN, California, *Chairman*

KATHLEEN M. RICE, New York
ANTHONY BRINDISI, New York
CHRIS PAPPAS, New Hampshire
ELAINE G. LURIA, Virginia
SUSIE LEE, Nevada
JOE CUNNINGHAM, South Carolina

GUS M. BILIRAKIS, Florida, *Ranking Member*
JACK BERGMAN, Michigan
JIM BANKS, Indiana
ANDY BARR, Kentucky
DANIEL MEUSER, Pennsylvania

Pursuant to clause 2(e)(4) of Rule XI of the Rules of the House, public hearing records of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs are also published in electronic form. **The printed hearing record remains the official version.** Because electronic submissions are used to prepare both printed and electronic versions of the hearing record, the process of converting between various electronic formats may introduce unintentional errors or omissions. Such occurrences are inherent in the current publication process and should diminish as the process is further refined.

CONTENTS

Tuesday, June 4, 2019

	Page
Evaluating The Effectiveness Of VA Vocational Rehabilitation And Employment Programs	1
OPENING STATEMENTS	
Honorable Mike Levin, Chairman	1
Honorable David P. Roe, Ranking Member, Full Committee on Veterans' Affairs	2
Honorable Gus M. Bilirakis, Ranking Member	2
WITNESSES	
Mr. William Streitberger, Director, Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Service, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs	4
Prepared Statement	33
Mr. Patrick Murray, Deputy Director, National Legislative Service, Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States	17
Prepared Statement	37
Mr. Derek Fronabarger, Director, Legislative Affairs, Wounded Warrior Project	18
Prepared Statement	38
Mr. Jeremy Villanueva, Assistant National Legislative Director, Disabled American Veterans	20
Prepared Statement	47
Mr. Steven Henry, Associate Legislative Director, Paralyzed Veterans of America	22
Prepared Statement	51
Ms. Tanya Ang, Vice President, Veterans Education Success	23
Prepared Statement	54

EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF VA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AND EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS

Tuesday June 4, 2019

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

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:30 a.m., in Room 210, House Visitors Center, Hon. Mike Levin [Chairman of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Levin, Rice, Brindisi, Pappas, Lee, Cunningham, Bilirakis, and Meuser.

Also Present: Representative Roe.

OPENING STATEMENT OF MIKE LEVIN, CHAIRMAN

Mr. LEVIN. Good morning. I call this hearing to order. I want to thank everyone for joining us today in the Veterans Affairs' Committee. Today's Economic Opportunity Subcommittee hearing will review the effectiveness of a critical long-standing benefit for our Nation's veterans, the VA Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program, or VR&E.

Earlier this year, we had a chance during our budget hearing to begin asking some very important questions about this program's direction, and today we have a great opportunity to dig a little deeper.

VR&E provides job training and other employment-related services to veterans with service-connected disabilities. Today we will be reviewing the program's funding levels, staffing, administration, and the ongoing modernization of the administrative systems.

I would like to speak on that last item, the matter of technology modernization. I wasn't here last Congress when this Committee learned about the major complications regarding case management modernization, but I know this Committee was very critical then about $12 million of lost investment and I would associate myself with many of the remarks the Committee made last year. We must be better stewards of taxpayer dollars and I hope it will be clear today that the VA has learned from what went wrong.

Regarding the VR&E program myself, I am concerned about both the veteran-participation rate and the number of quality counselors the VA is employing. We should be encouraging more veterans who are eligible to sign up for VR&E, but first we must demonstrate strong results, which requires hiring more counselors. I am grateful that the VA is making progress to bring the counselor-to-student

ratio closer to the 1-to-125 ratio that we expect, but I am concerned that the program as a whole is suffering because that hasn't happened sooner.

Second, I would like to see the VA more actively promote VR&E services to our veterans. I know many of our witnesses agree with me on this point. For eligible veterans, VR&E should be a part of the transition process from the military.

Finally, we must do a better job at making sure our veterans are receiving the very best advice from the very best counselors. This Committee has heard from veterans who have either been misinformed by VR&E counselors and given advice that prioritized savings to the VA over the quality of education. While we must be prudent, we should not seek out savings at the expense of outcomes for our veterans.

I look forward to hearing the testimony from our witnesses to determine where we should be focusing our efforts.

Mr. LEVIN. On a different note, I would also like to welcome Angela Disbrow, who is shadowing me today. She is a preschool teacher from Oceanside, California, my district, and she is with the National Foster Care Initiative for National Foster Care Month. Angela, thank you for joining us.

And I know my friend Dr. Roe, who is Ranking Member of the Full Veterans' Affairs Committee, is being shadowed as well.

Dr. Roe?

OPENING STATEMENT OF DAVID P. ROE, RANKING MEMBER, FULL COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

Mr. ROE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to introduce Alex Glendo. Alex is a freshman or just finished his freshman year at the University of Tennessee, and he is majoring in microbiology and wants to be an orthopedic surgeon. I told Alex; anybody can be a carpenter. But, anyway, that is his choice, and we are really glad—I participated in this program since its inception and these are some outstanding young people who have stepped up to represent a group of young people who are not very well represented, which are foster kids, and it is a huge problem in this country. And it is great to see from Oceanside, California a teacher, and a future orthopedic surgeon who may fix my bum right knee in the future, we are very glad to have them here and I want us to give them a warm welcome.

[Applause.]

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Dr. Roe. I certain share those sentiments and really appreciate the opportunity.

And, with that, I now would like to recognize my friend Ranking Member Bilirakis for 5 minutes for his opening statement.

OPENING STATEMENT OF GUS M. BILIRAKIS, RANKING MEMBER

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, I appreciate it very much.

Today, the Subcommittee will conduct an oversight hearing on the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program at the Department of Veterans Affairs. VR&E is a program designed to assist our severely wounded and disabled veterans by helping them

find meaningful employment or reach maximum independent living, a most worthy cause.

Every day, VR&E's masters-level counselors work diligently with veterans in the program to help create a rehabilitation plan that fits their needs and to execute that plan. Counselors are also a constant source of support for the participant as they go through their individualized rehab program.

I agree with those who have said that the VR&E Program should be the crown jewel of benefits provided through the Veterans Benefits Administration; it is certainly needed.

This program is more than just a benefits program, it is also a vital first step for disabled veterans to become more financially independent, which is a win-win for veterans and of course taxpayers alike.

For years, this Subcommittee has continued to sound the alarm about the rising caseloads for VR&E counselors and the impact these caseloads were having on employee morale and services provided to veterans. I am pleased to see that after many years of advocacy by this Subcommittee and Veterans Service Organizations, VA has begun the hard work of hiring additional counselors to reduce caseloads to the recommended 1-to-125 counselor-to-veteran ratio. I want to thank the VBA for addressing this issue that was seemingly falling on deaf ears. Thanks so very much for doing this, it is so important.

Another topic that seems to be falling on deaf ears is oversight of the new case management system for tracking VR&E participants. This system was supposed to finally eliminate participants paper-based file that can be lost or damaged and hamper counselor efficiency. After years of waiting, in 2015 VR&E was given the green light to begin working with VA information technology staff on a replacement for the current case management program that has been in place since 1997. After almost 3 years of work, eight different IT bills, hundreds of man hours—sound familiar—and $12 million, VA ended up with a system that didn't work. Unacceptable. We have been told that none of the code created is salvageable and the only thing VA were able to get out of this work were lessons learned for the next time.

This was the main topic of discussion at our oversight hearing on VR&E last year, which outlined problems—of course, the Chairman alluded to this—facing VA with the creation of this new case management system. I would be remiss if I didn't point out that this incident and the challenges faced with the Forever GI Bill implementation last fall highlight challenges VBA leaders have had in getting the attention of the VA Office of Information and Technology.

To the best of my knowledge, no one associated with the development of either of these IT systems has been held accountable, not one. Unacceptable, again. It begs the question of how many veterans would have been better served if this $12 million program had been better—the money had been better spent.

So, Mr. Chairman, I am encouraged by the recent investments in VR&E programs, including the promise of a new case management system in fiscal year 2021. I am also encouraged by the suite of new tools that are being developed and have the potential to great-

ly assist VR&E counselors with their day-to-day operations. However, it is Congress' job to ask the tough questions about these new systems and processes will improve the experience and outcomes for disabled veterans, not just make things easier for VA employees. Again, that is the key. I mean, we are trying to help our veterans, so we need more production to serve more veterans.

Finally, I am looking forward to hearing from our witnesses how we can improve consistency of services and decisions being made by VR&E counselors across the country. I would also like to receive recommendations on how to improve and track long-term outcomes of VR&E participants.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing, and I look forward to hearing from all of our witnesses.

Folks, it has got to work. I mean, this is a great program, it is a wonderful idea, great concept, but it has got to work for our veterans, and that is what we are going to make sure happens.

So, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Ranking Member Bilirakis. I certainly share your sentiments.

On our first panel we are joined by Mr. William Streitberger, Director of the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Service at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Thank you for joining us. As you know, you will have 5 minutes, but your full statement will be added to the record.

Director Streitberger, you are now recognized to present your opening statement.

STATEMENT OF WILLIAM STREITBERGER

Mr. STREITBERGER. Good morning, Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, Ranking Member Roe, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the VR&E Program. I am deeply honored and privileged to be here not only as the Executive Director, but as a proud recipient of this benefit and alumnus. I would not be in this role today had it not been for this tremendous contribution this program has had on my life.

Today, I am excited to share with you VR&E's historic modernization efforts to provide participants with the benefits that they have earned in a manner that honors their service.

The mission of VR&E is to assist servicemembers and veterans to prepare for, find, and maintain employment. Services fall under one of five tracks.

Ninety six percent of our participants are in the long-term services track, which includes all payment of training and other required resources. Currently, more than 1,000 professional VRCs deliver services through a network of over 350 locations. VR&E works with the OFO to provide oversight, guidance, communication, and advice to the field.

As Executive Director, I am heavily involved in all aspects of program operations. Since my arrival, I have instituted a comprehensive change-management strategy to support the modernization effort. I have traveled the country conducting town halls to share my

vision and engage in discussions on key topics of concern and interest.

There are currently three significant initiatives underway to strengthen program oversight and compliance.

First, VACO will expand program oversight and compliance, and will expand that by threefold. Our new model will ensure compliance at each regional office every fiscal year.

Second, our QA transformation will increase effectiveness and efficiency of the program, enabling us to get a more accurate picture of VR&E performance.

And, third, technology will increase our capability to monitor operations, enforce compliance, drive higher quality, and eliminate inconsistencies.

In fiscal year 2018, VR&E serviced nearly 16,000 veterans to achieve a positive outcome, an increase of 3 percent from fiscal year 2017.

VR&E has implemented a new growth metric which measures the percentage of veterans entitled to our program that actually enter a plan of service. This will help us focus on increasing participants in the program. We continue to collaborate with DoD to off services to Active duty, Reserve, and National Guard through the IDES program, providing early intervention counseling and other services to wounded, ill, and injured servicemembers.

Further, we support transitioning servicemembers, veterans, and family members through Chapter 36, including adjustment counseling, vocational testing, education, and career advice.

We consistently hear veterans say that they do not remember hearing about VR&E in TAP. We will improve the TAP curriculum to add time based on the 2018 NDAA legislation. We continue to track veteran cohorts in the congressionally-mandated 20-year longitudinal study. Nearly 90 percent of participants reported moderate to high satisfaction with the program and around 90 percent of veterans achieving rehabilitation from an employment plan were employed last year. Those who complete the program report positive economic outcomes, including higher employment rates, months worked, annual earnings, and home ownership, as compared to those who discontinued from the program.

VR&E has embarked on a comprehensive modernization effort to improve customer service by streamlining processes and modernizing our systems. We have developed an overarching plan to include implementation of a new case management solution to replace our existing 20-year-old legacy platform. We will leverage software as a service, enabling us to grow with technology into the future. We anticipate acquisition before the end of fiscal year 2019. Concurrently, we will leverage existing people, process, and technology initiatives to more efficiently prepare us to transition into the new CMS. These include a virtual assistant for automated appointment scheduling and routine communication; tele-counseling to meet veterans on their terms, creating greater flexibility, convenience and access; e-invoicing to standardize and streamline invoice payment processing; paperless claims processing to move us fully into an electronic work environment; and centralized mail to streamline the receipt, processing, and filing of documents.

As we implement these changes, VRCs will manage workload more efficiently and effectively, providing world-class counseling and employment services to participants.

Mr. Chairman, VR&E continues to move in the direction of modernizing this very consequential benefit. With these initiatives, we will substantially improve and enhance the program. My vision is to continually challenge the status quo, to think differently to provide veterans with the benefits they have earned in a manner that honors their service, in the way they want to be served; that VR&E is a modern, 21st century facilitator of economic opportunity, the crown jewel in VBA's benefits portfolio.

This concludes my statement, Mr. Chairman. I would be pleased to answer questions from you, the Ranking Members, and other Members of the Subcommittee.

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

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Director Streitberger. I now recognize myself for 5 minutes to begin our questioning. I want to thank you again for being here. I very much value VR&E and its contributions and your work. That being said, I think there are areas of concern that we want to address today. I know many of my colleagues will I am sure talk about the $12 million and some of the concerns around improved technology.

I want to talk for a bit and ask you a few questions about counselors, which I think are really the backbone of VR&E, and, specifically, I would like to focus my time on staffing levels, quality, and caseloads for our counselors.

Last year, the VA began the process of increasing its Vocational and Rehabilitation workforce to 1,113 counselors across the country. Director, what is the status of that effort and when do you expect to reach that goal?

Mr. STREITBERGER. Thank you for your question, sir. We are very pleased to say today that we are currently moving our 1-to-125 with the 169 new counselors. We have hired 166 of those counselors, the last remaining three are currently in the offer process and we hope to on-board them this month. We are also working very strategically to realign resources around the country to actually move cases based on our electronic capability to stations that have more capacity to serve veterans in ways that we can serve them that are not so intensely counselor or personal relationship-related, but to provide service to these veterans as timely as possible.

As of today, we should have a 1-to-125 ratio across the Nation in each of our regional offices, the national average being 1-to-122.

I appreciate that. As I mentioned during my opening statement, we have heard some quality concerns from some veterans. Can you, Director, explain how are counselors evaluated and how is the situation handled if a veteran is unhappy with their counselor?

Mr. STREITBERGER. Yes, sir. Thank you for the question. So, three things. Our counselors are consistently monitored by their supervisory staff within each regional office on a monthly basis, they have a performance review. We also look at quality from a local and national perspective on a monthly basis to ensure the

consistency of program delivery of our service to our veteran participants. And then we have robust training programs within VR&E Service where all of our counselors when they are onboarded as new employees receive virtual training for preparatory courses to attend an in-residence training session. And then after that training, following onto those services is an intensive mentoring program within the regional office, the station that they work at.

Mr. LEVIN. But I guess, again—that is helpful, but if a veteran has a specific problem with a counselor, how is that specific problem addressed? How do you interact with that veteran and how do you follow up?

Mr. STREITBERGER. Absolutely. So that can happen on many levels. We hope that that takes places at the local level and that the local level leadership are involved and engaged with that veteran regarding their concern.

I believe that many of those instances are solved at that level, but we do receive inquiries from veterans through our partners that will be here on the panel today, we work very closely to resolve those issues. And I personally receive inquiries from veterans whom I have met with as I have traveled the country and gone to their conferences and have invited them to speak with me personally. I can tell you, in those instances we are very quick to resolve those issues to ensure no interruptions to the veteran's services.

Mr. LEVIN. I appreciate that. I also recognize a big aspect of program quality is out of counselors' control. There are many skilled counselors in the field who are simply overburdened with too many cases, too much administrative work. I am hopeful that both issues will be eased by VA's hiring and information technology efforts. However, I think we have to continually assess capacity to ensure veterans are well served.

Director, how does the VA monitor counselor caseloads and do these measures include time spent on direct counseling versus paperwork?

Mr. STREITBERGER. Thank you for that great question, sir. So one of the major emphases on driving modernization in our processes has been from our research that says over 60 percent of a counselor's day is actually spent in administrative tasks and functions. So driving the modernization effort through e-invoicing, through our virtual assistant, ultimately the case management solution, is to alleviate the amount of time a counselor spends in actually updating our systems, processing invoices, reconciling credit cards and the like, and turning that capacity back toward direct-facing veteran services, which is what they have been hired to do, which is what they are trained to do, and which is what I absolutely want them doing each and every day.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Director. I appreciate your answers.

I now would like to recognize Ranking Member Bilirakis for 5 minutes.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, I appreciate it.

Sir, how many actual veterans, how many veterans are counselors? I know you have to have a master's degree and what have you, but how many currently are veterans?

Mr. STREITBERGER. Sir, I would have to take that question for the record. I know that roughly 55 percent of our workforce are veterans; in terms of veteran counselors, I don't have that exact figure.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Yeah, if you could get that information, because I think it is important.

Mr. STREITBERGER. Absolutely, I would be happy to do that.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. And then also the folks, the veterans that qualify for this program and need it—so, you know, qualification and need, because some veterans obviously get jobs on their own and do well, but what is the percentage of people that actually need the program that participate in the program?

Mr. STREITBERGER. Sir, could I ask you to clarify that question? Percentage—

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Yeah. So, for example—

Mr. STREITBERGER [continued]. —of people who actually apply—

Mr. BILIRAKIS [continued]. —if you qualify—

Mr. STREITBERGER. Yes.

Mr. BILIRAKIS [continued]. —okay? And you need the rehabilitation, the job, what have you—placement, what have you, vocational services, and you are aware of those services, you are aware it is available with VR&E, how many of those people actually use the service?

Mr. STREITBERGER. So, roughly 110,000 veterans applied for our program last year and somewhere in the neighborhood of just under 25,000 actually entered a program of service. So, roughly 25 percent of veterans applying will actually enter a plan of services.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. So how can we get that more participation? Because I understand that participation has declined in the last 2 or 3 years. How can we do that? Is it more awareness? What would recommend?

Mr. STREITBERGER. So there's several things that I would recommend. First of all, expanding the TAP briefing on VR&E will certainly help through the 2018 NDAA legislation; more outreach, which our outreach team is planning on doing more extensively through social media; through our engagement with our VSOs at their conferences; through our Vet Success on Campus counselors, who are at institutions of higher learning across the country.

But we also need to be more clear about what our program is about. When we look at the discontinuances from our plans and our program, 66 percent of the folks who are actually discontinued from the program out of applicant status or out of entitlement status, and we believe that much of that has to do with maybe two things: one is, I didn't realize that this was an employment program and I just want to go to school and get a degree, and I don't want to have to participate in the employment services piece and get a job to participate in the program.

The other is that the veteran does not want to after leaving service have to participate in a program that has such intensive oversight. And that is necessary for our folks to persist in the program and to achieve a positive outcome, but I have heard personally from my veteran roundtables as I have traveled across the country that, I got out of the service, I have been told what to do for many years, and then came to VR&E and I found out that I was going

to have to be tracked every month, I was going to have to submit my grades, I was going to have to meet with a counselor, and I was just done with that.

I met a nurse who is in a program of ours for a master's degree in Little Rock, Arkansas who told me, I was so glad to find my leader again after 2 years floundering in my own educational pursuits.

So I think we have a lot of that we have yet to work with, and I am really eager to dig in with my team and find out how we can communicate this program differently so that veterans see the value in having the wraparound services that we provide.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Yes, I think it is so very important and I appreciate that. Anything we can do to help.

I have one more question, Mr. Chairman.

As I mentioned in my opening statement, I am pleased to hear about the new technology and game-changers that we are going to put in place for the VR&E counselors. What type of improvement should we expect to see in demonstrable outcome measures for VR&E participants once these new tools are implemented?

Mr. STREITBERGER. Thank you—

Mr. BILIRAKIS. You kind of touched on it—

Mr. STREITBERGER. Yeah.

Mr. BILIRAKIS [continued]. —but if you could elaborate, I appreciate it.

Mr. STREITBERGER. Absolutely, and that is the exciting part about what we are doing. And our team back at headquarters, we are involved in this process every day looking at how are we going to measure the success of the implementation of this technology and, quite frankly, the bottom-line outcome is going to be how we are able to create more capacity for counselors to provide direct-facing services to veterans each and every day. How much more time can they spend sitting across from them from their desk and dealing with their issues, and providing them with guidance and concern or referrals to our partners in the community, VHA and other places, to ensure that everything that they need to be successful is taking place in their plan of service. When they are overworked and they are spending most of their time doing administrative tasks, they can't get to all of their veterans on their caseload to provide that service, and I am working each and every day tirelessly to ensure that these technology initiatives eliminate or eradicate to the greatest extent possible that burden that they have currently, that is not providing service to veterans in a manner that they deserve to be served.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Very good, sir. Mr. Streitberger, I think you have some great ideas and, again, we are looking forward to working with you on this, because it is so important.

Thank you very much. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. STREITBERGER. Thank you, Ranking Member.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Thank you.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Ranking Member.

I would now like to recognize Miss Rice for 5 minutes.

Miss RICE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Sir, last year the VA assigned a Vet Success on Campus, a VSOC counselor to be shared between two schools in my district, Nassau

and—well, one of them, Nassau is in my district, and then the Suffolk Community College, both are on Long Island. So I can't even tell you how much of a game-changer that was.

I mean, the VSOC counselors are such a valuable resource for student veterans. They provide benefits assistance, port services during the transition from military to college life. And I, as well as everyone on this Committee, has advocated for an expansion of that program, because not every school and not every district, you know, schools in districts across the country are as lucky as we were to get a VSOC.

So, does the VA plan to continue expanding the program, and what challenges are you currently facing in terms of the VA's ability to meet the demand for placements of VSOC counselors on additional college campuses?

Mr. STREITBERGER. Thank you for your question, ma'am, and I could not agree with you more on the value of the VSOC program. We are extremely interested in expanding the program. I have asked for seven additional FTE in the 2020 budget, but that is clearly not enough. I have over 225 institutions of higher learning clamoring to get the same resources and I am currently only authorized 145 FTE to fill those slots.

So the current representation at 70 installations around the country represents—I'm sorry, the 83 that I have authorized—so we would need to expand the authorization of FTE to fill any additional VSOC roles.

Miss RICE. So can you just go back to something that you were talking about when you said 66 percent of the people who leave—who don't access the services anymore, there were two specific reasons you said for that?

Mr. STREITBERGER. So, in our estimation from what we have heard from veterans, they have either come to an orientation after they have filed an application for our program and determined upon hearing about what VR&E is all about, which is employment and not education, education being a component of how they achieve a positive outcome to become suitably employed. And then the others not wanting to participate in a rigorous process of achieving their employment goal, which might be through education or training, where they have to engage on a very frequent basis with their counselor to provide oversight and other program services.

Miss RICE. So when is the first time that a servicemember has contact with you and the program?

Mr. STREITBERGER. So a servicemember can have contact with our program during 6 months prior to their discharge through our VSOC program on campus, they have engagements with us through our Integrated Disability Evaluation Assistance programs at our military installations when they are transitioning out as wounded, ill, or injured. And they typically come to us after they have separated from the service, have applied for the benefit, and attended an orientation program at one of our 56 regional offices or 142 out-based offices.

Miss RICE. So what percentage of your program attendees are you connecting with before they officially separate?

Mr. STREITBERGER. That question I would have to take for the record.

Miss RICE. Can you? Because it seems to me that that is—there has to be earlier engagement in order to maximize the use of this program and helping the people we are intending to help.

Mr. STREITBERGER. Yes, ma'am.

Miss RICE. So, if you could get that information, that would be great.

Mr. STREITBERGER. I would be happy to do so. Thank you.

Miss RICE. Thank you very much.

Mr. STREITBERGER. Yes, ma'am.

Miss RICE. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Miss Rice.

I now recognize the Ranking Member of our Veterans Affairs' Committee, Dr. Roe, for 5 minutes.

Mr. ROE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for being here, and I just have a very few questions.

But we have seven and a half million unfilled jobs in the country right now and the unemployment rate among our veteran population, which is great, is 1.7 percent. That is the lowest I remember. But the question I have, I guess, for you is, how large is your budget and how many people do you serve, and how do you measure success? In other words, a year after you finish the program, there is—I mean, every organization ought to have a metric or way to say we were successful in what we did, and about how much money do you invest per participant in this counseling process?

Mr. STREITBERGER. Thank you for your question, sir. Regarding how much money we actually spent—

Mr. ROE. What is your budget?

Mr. STREITBERGER. So, in 2018, the budget for the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program was $1.3 billion.

Mr. ROE. Okay.

Mr. STREITBERGER. About $250 million of that was for discretionary funding to administer the program. So in terms of understanding the success rate, first of all I would like to say, how we view success is by the outcome of what the veteran experience is.

And I think of an Air Force veteran that recently was in our program for just about five and a half years who had struggled severely with alcoholism, joblessness, critical medical issues, and the suicide of his wife, who left him as a single father to his 13-year-old son, and how after 5.5 years in our program he is now today a Vocational Rehabilitation counselor working in the Department of Veterans Affairs. He is happily remarried, due to the adjustment counseling he received from our program, and he is a proud homeowner. That is how we determine success—

Mr. ROE. But, I mean, at—not to interrupt you, but at the end of—and you have how many, you said 110,000 veterans in this—

Mr. STREITBERGER. Right now, we have 115,000 in the program.

Mr. ROE. Actively in the program?

Mr. STREITBERGER. Yes, sir.

Mr. ROE. So it would look to me like that maybe 12 months or 24 months or 36 months later, because the whole idea of this is to get into—you have been injured, but to get into a gainful employ-

ment that you can take care of your family and raise your family and earn an income, am I correct?

Mr. STREITBERGER. That is correct, sir.

Mr. ROE. Well, then we ought to know at 12 months, or 24 or 36 or 5 years, are we actually doing that.

Mr. STREITBERGER. Yes.

Mr. ROE. And, if we are not, then we probably ought to change how we are doing it.

Mr. STREITBERGER. Absolutely. And so participants in our program spend roughly 5 to 6 years on average in the program, and so we track them through that, the continuum of the program, to ensure that they are on track and that they are meeting their particular individual program requirements. Determining success for each individual veteran is based on what in fact their program of service is. Is it a short-term training program and can we measure that over a period of 6 months, or is it an education program that includes a 4-year degree program and then subsequent employment services post-education to get them ready for—

Mr. ROE. Well, again, not to quote Yogi Berra, but if you don't know where you are going, you might end up someplace else. And so you ought to have some goals out there and have we met those metrics for these veterans—

Mr. STREITBERGER. Yes.

Mr. ROE [continued]. —and been successful. And I think, if we are, that is great, because I am huge supporter of Voc Rehab; we used it in Tennessee on the non-military side very successfully to retrain people and get them back in the workforce. And that is the whole purpose of this—

Mr. STREITBERGER. Absolutely.

Mr. ROE [continued]. —question is, are we doing it?

Mr. STREITBERGER. We are, sir. And last year, as I mentioned, we rehabilitated almost 16,000 veterans in our program of service, which is 3 percent higher over the last year, and we are on track to do even more this year, which is the ultimate determination of success of our program is to achieve our stated program targets and outcomes.

Mr. ROE. And are your numbers—and I missed that—are your numbers stable or going up or down? And, again, not knowing about the program, obviously veterans can't access it.

Mr. STREITBERGER. Yes, so great question, sir. Our program outcomes have increased over the last 3 years, but our participation has dropped over the last 3 years. So, as I mentioned in my opening statement, we have instituted a growth metric, a driving metrics that will point attention to our counselors to actually work with veterans to ensure that they get into a program of service, so we can have more folks in the program, we can sustain them throughout the program, and can continue to have high levels of positive outcomes, which means veterans are being employed and supporting their livelihood.

Mr. ROE. And my time is very short and I think you have answered this, but of the 15,000 or so veterans that discontinued, I think you have mentioned just you may have gotten in there and this program just is not right for me, is that—

Mr. STREITBERGER. Correct, sir.

Mr. ROE. Okay. I yield back, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

Mr. LEVIN. Thanks, Dr. Roe.

I would now like to recognize Congressman Pappas for 5 minutes.

Mr. PAPPAS. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you to the Ranking Member and Mr. Streitberger, great to be with you here today.

Just following up, I wanted to draw on the VA's annual performance plan and looking at the class achievement rates contained within there. I noticed that 2018 had an achievement rate of 72 percent, it fell to 65 percent in 2018. There is a strategic target of 68 percent, as you well know. I am wondering if you could comment on those numbers and what needs to be done to get them moving back in the right direction.

Mr. STREITBERGER. Thank you for that great question. I am very excited to tell the Subcommittee that within VR&E Service, we are working on new measures, what I call measuring the middle. We do a really good job, sir, up front of measuring how timeliness of getting folks into a program of service, their average days to entitlement, their average days to evaluation and planning, and then on the back end of the program we measure the timeliness of their employment services and then their positive outcome targets. But within the middle where they persist in our program, we evaluate a lot of the activities that our hardworking counselors do each and every day to support a veteran in persisting in the program and our qualitative measures.

We are currently working right now with a work group of folks from around the country to look at what do we do in the middle. What are those key activities that we must do and elevate them to our performance standard level, so that all employees are focused on ensuring that the activities they do each and every day are ensuring a veteran is successful in persisting in their program, so that they can have the positive outcome that they worked for from the beginning.

Mr. PAPPAS. Can you talk about the timeliness in the entitlement determination of a 45-day goal, how that target was arrived at and whether you are going to look to narrow that in the future?

Mr. STREITBERGER. So, with our new technology implementation, we are going to look very closely at how that shrinks our timeliness in many of these processes. One of the things that is really, really important to point out about finding someone entitled or developing a plan of service is that each plan of service or each program of service is very uniquely individual to every individual veteran. And it is at that point in many instances we turn this process back to the veteran to go out and do vocational exploration with our DOL Vets partners, to do research on the types of schools and programs that they want to do. Is that education program viable and will it ultimately result in employment in the geographical location where they reside.

So the timeliness there, we would like to of course streamline that to the extent that we possibly can, but it is also there to ensure that the veteran has explored his or her option to be successful in the program more fully.

Mr. PAPPAS. Would you be able to set a specific target in the future or is that TBD?

Mr. STREITBERGER. Well, I think it is TBD, and I will tell you why. We are in a change-management process where we have unfrozen all of what we have been doing in the past and we are implementing new people, process, and technology initiatives, and as we lay them down between now and the first quarter of fiscal year 2021, there is going to be a lot of change and our ability to firmly understand what it is we are going to be able to measure and the benefits that we will achieve, through the modernization and technology initiatives in particular, I think is TBD until we have re-freeze and we have our new process in place, and that we can evaluate what is happening in across the value stream of the program of services that we provide to our veterans.

Mr. PAPPAS. One final area, I wanted to address the Video Connect Program.

Mr. STREITBERGER. Yes.

Mr. PAPPAS. I think there is a lot of potential here, especially for veterans from a district like mine who are in rural communities not adjacent to services, this will allow them to virtually see telecounselors. And I am wondering, you know, how equipped our veterans are to take advantage of that technology if there are some on the other side of the digital divide that won't be able to because of lack of access to broadband or, you know, the technology they need?

Mr. STREITBERGER. Absolutely, great question. One of the things that I am most excited about, we have heard from our employees in the field about their veteran participants who have not been able to come in to have a face-to-face appointment for various reasons: distance, time, money, their inability to get off work, and the like. So this new platform that we actually launched in November of last year is one of the easiest platforms to run this technology on. It is the Cisco Pexip platform, it can be used on any mobile device that has a camera and a microphone. So on your iPad, your iPod, your whatever, you can access this technology and have an appointment with your counselor.

Mr. PAPPAS. Thank you. I yield back.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Pappas.

I now recognize Mr. Meuser for 5 minutes.

Mr. MEUSER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Director. Looking at your background and extensive experience, I can see clearly you are virtually the ideal person to be the Director of this important area for the Department of Veterans Affairs and for our veterans.

So I want to run through some questions for you relatively quickly. The system, the integrated system that we are getting into now, are you confident in its development and the progress being made?

Mr. STREITBERGER. Thank you for your question, sir, and thank you for your confidence in me, I greatly appreciate that. I would say with 100-percent certainty that I am confident that we will deploy the system in the first quarter of 2021, and we will implement components of it as they become available after its acquisition at the end of this fiscal year.

And I will tell you that there has never been more oversight of this implementation than we currently have right now. I am partnering with executives at my level in our Office of Business

Process Integration, with OI&T, and we have actually added another layer in that process to ensure that we successfully acquire and start deploying this system. Our acquisitions executive leadership is in our scrums on a weekly basis to ensure that we are hitting all the targets of our critical path among our integrated master schedule. There is no daylight between our engagement among those entities to ensure that we are successful for the veterans that deserve to be served in this manner.

Mr. MEUSER. In my district, Pennsylvania's 9th, do you know of the employers, for instance, that often hire veterans, or is that on a list and do you do your best to match those to the veterans that live in the district?

Mr. STREITBERGER. Absolutely, sir. I personally could not name them one by one—

Mr. MEUSER. Sure.

Mr. STREITBERGER [continued]. —but our employment coordinators who are employed in our regional offices and many of our vocational/rehabilitation counselors who deal heavily with our employers, we have those employers listed; we are engaging with them out in the community, we are offering them the additional services that we provide to employers to help ensure that veterans are successful when they do become employed with those employers.

Mr. MEUSER. Now, they don't operate out of the VAs?

Mr. STREITBERGER. They do.

Mr. MEUSER. They do?

Mr. STREITBERGER. Yes, they do.

Mr. MEUSER. Okay, thank you. Do you then—if the skills aren't there, do you match them up as well with various vocational schools and career development centers?

Mr. STREITBERGER. Absolutely. So we assess their program needs, we determine their interests, aptitudes, and ability. We write a plan of services for them based on their career goals and then we match them with institutions of higher learning, training facilities. We also do on-the-job training programs, non-paid work experience programs, and the like, to ensure that they are fully prepared to be successful when they engage with that employer.

Mr. MEUSER. Okay. How about transportation when that becomes an issue where a veteran who has the ability to do the job just can't get to the job?

Mr. STREITBERGER. So those are pressing issues that we are working very closely on with our DOL–Vets partnership. We have a work group where we are working with community partners through our SVPs and other community partnerships to help us bridge the gap where transportation is concerned. It is a pressing issue that some of our program participants face and we know we have to address that issue.

Mr. MEUSER. How is the volunteer initiative going for that; is it strong, is it good? Are there people stepping up to volunteer to provide transportation for veterans?

Mr. STREITBERGER. So specific to the VR&E Program, we don't participate in that; however, if we do have veterans who are coming to our co-located regional offices with a hospital, they often participate in transportation services such as the DAV transportation services and the like. But where it concerns them actually getting

to work from their home and the like, we are still dealing with those issues.

Mr. MEUSER. Yes, that is difficult. There are, I think, about 16 states that offer tax credits to employers for hiring veterans; do those tax credits create the right incentive, in your opinion?

Mr. STREITBERGER. I do. And our employment coordinators or Vocational Rehabilitation counselors work with the employers to inform them. We also have special employer incentives to incentivize employers to hire veterans that may need some more on-the-job experience and training before they are somewhat at the journeyman or woman level, so we work with them to inform them about those as well.

In addition to any workplace adjustments or reasonable accommodations the veteran might need to be successful in that role, we can support those requests with the employers as well.

Mr. MEUSER. Any data you have on that that perhaps we could share within Pennsylvania or any state, for that matter, would be helpful.

Mr. STREITBERGER. It would be my pleasure.

Mr. MEUSER. And thank you for your service.

Mr. STREITBERGER. Thank you, sir.

Mr. MEUSER. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Meuser.

I now recognize Mr. Cunningham for 5 minutes.

Mr. CUNNINGHAM. I just want to thank you for your service and being here today, and I would yield back to the chair and save my time for the second panel. Thank you so much.

Mr. STREITBERGER. Thank you, sir, I appreciate it.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Cunningham.

And thank you, Director Streitberger. I really appreciate your testimony and your work on behalf of veterans, and your service yourself.

Mr. STREITBERGER. Thank you.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you so much for all that you do.

I would now like to call on our second panel to join us.

[Pause.]

Mr. LEVIN. All right. Everybody ready? Record time.

Appearing before us today is Mr. Patrick Murray, Deputy Director for the National Legislative Service at the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States. Good to see you again. Also here is Mr. Derek Fronabarger, who serves as Director of Legislative Affairs for the Wounded Warrior Project. Thanks for being here.

We also have Mr. Jeremy Villanueva, Assistant National Legislative Director for the Disabled American Veterans.

Next is Mr. Steven Henry, the Associate Legislative Director for the Paralyzed Veterans of America.

Finally, Ms. Tanya Ang, Vice President at Veterans Education Success.

Good to see you all again and thanks for joining us.

As you know, you will have 5 minutes, but your full statement will be added to the record.

With that, Mr. Murray, you are now recognized to present your opening statement.

STATEMENT OF PATRICK MURRAY

Mr. MURRAY. Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and Members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States and its Auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to present our views on this important program today.

Making sure that veterans remain employed in the right career for every one of them is incredibly important. One vital program that veterans can use is the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program, commonly referred to as Voc Rehab. This program provides critical counseling and other adjunct services necessary to enable service-disabled veterans to overcome barriers as they prepare for, find, and maintain gainful employment.

Ensuring veterans achieve meaningful and prosperous careers will improve their financial situations, thereby mitigating issues such as unemployment and homelessness.

VA budget documents state the Voc Rehab program will meet and sustain the congressionally-mandated goal of 1-to-125 client-to-counselor ratio. However, the latest data in VA's budget documents also shows that from 2016 to 2018 the number of Voc Rehab participants dropped by more than 5 percent; there was also a caseload reduction of 8.4 percent. It would appear VA is able to meet the 1-to-125 goal by having fewer veterans to serve.

VA has hired additional counselors, which brought them within the mandated ratio, and have made substantial technological upgrades within the past year. VA also predicts that some of these changes will increase participation within the Voc Rehab program. If that does in fact happen and participation increases, then VA will again be outside the 1-to-125 ratio.

Now is the time to be planning for the additional resources or employees needed to accommodate the increase in clients and not wait until after the fact. This is an opportunity for VA to get ahead of an issue instead of waiting until the problem arises.

While the number of counselors is something to always keep an eye on, the consistency of granting approval for this program is important as well. A consistent complaint from our members is they are unaware of the Voc Rehab program and just exactly who is eligible for it. A lot of disinformation is spread by word of mouth, and there is a lot of confusion about eligibility and exactly how the program can be used. Some veterans are approved to use Voc Rehab to attain advanced degrees and others are denied the same opportunity.

The flexibility of Voc Rehab is one of the best parts of the program, but not having standardized usages leads to a lot of confusion and resentment towards VA. The VFW recommends a more robust discussion of the program within TAP classes, which we believe would help mitigate some of the confusion surround Voc Rehab and may guide more veterans to using it if there is better information presented earlier.

While Voc Rehab is an employment program, it is commonly used for training on college campuses. The processing of Voc Rehab claims to universities is where we hear a lot of Voc Rehab problems. The processing of Chapter 31 claims takes months to go through the system, leaving some universities without payment for

multiple semesters. In some cases, students are not allowed to further enroll until payments are made, and in other students are being counseled to voluntarily not enroll until the delayed payments are made.

The delays in processing Voc Rehab payments are negatively affecting users of the program and this problem needs to be rectified immediately.

Lastly, for years the VFW has called upon Congress to make Voc Rehab available for life. The 12-year limit on utilizing Voc Rehab is detrimental to older veterans who might be seeking to remain current with the evolving job market or a change in employment needs due to a service-connected disability received years ago.

Recently, the forever part of the Forever GI Bill was implemented because we recognize the importance of education throughout veterans' lives, employment and training opportunities are just as important throughout all stages of their lives. We fully understand that counselors have the ability to waive the 12-year requirement and are told they often do so. However, the issue we have heard from our members isn't that they are being denied, but instead they aren't even applying because the requirements say they aren't eligible. Removing this barrier for applying would help veterans at any point in their lives to utilize this great program, and that is why we support H.R. 444 to remove this limit.

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. This concludes my remarks and I am prepared to take any questions you may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF PATRICK MURRAY APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Murray.

Mr. Fronabarger, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF DEREK FRONABARGER

Mr. FRONABARGER. Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, Wounded Warrior Project is pleased to discuss our thoughts regarding the Veterans Affairs Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program, and thank you for the opportunity to do so.

Wounded Warrior Project has more than a dozen direct programs which we offer to wounded, ill, and injured servicemembers and veterans to help with their physical and mental challenges. One of these programs informing our perspective for this morning's hearing is known as Warriors to Work.

This program assists WWP alumni in searching for jobs with an emphasis on helping at transition. We provide a range of services designed to meet veterans wherever they are in their job-seeking process. We assist Warriors with resume building, job placement, interview skills, and military occupational skill translation. While we can connect veterans to all of our programs no matter where they live, Warriors to Work is one of the only three programs where we have dedicated staff in each of our locations and field offices because it helps us meet such a critical need.

We realize that education and vocational training are key tools for this population of Warriors and, in addition to the proof of our programming, we have specific data to illustrate that point. Perhaps most telling is that our annual survey reflects that 27 percent of our Warriors who reported currently enrolled in school reported doing so through the VR&E program.

Over 95 percent of the more than 33,000 Warriors who responded to our survey stated that they have a disability rating over 20 percent and, regardless of disability rating, we know that a fulfilling career after service is critical to overall well-being.

In this context, we are pleased with the current VR&E information technology improvements; specifically, the virtual assistance and tele-counseling changes. The virtual assistant will support scheduling appointments be it text message, email, and other platforms. We hope that this new tool will allow Vocational Rehabilitation counselors more time to work with the veteran and lower the rate of scheduling complications.

Additionally, VR&E will be introducing a tele-counseling ability using VA's Video Connect Software.

It can be difficult for veterans to drive to a local office due to time constraints or location. We hope using tele-counseling will drastically reduce no-shows and allow counselors more time to interact with veterans.

We have a few recommendations regarding the VR&E, which is outlined in more detail in our written testimony; however, we would like to highlight three issue areas for this Committee's consideration.

First, WWP recommends aligning the Chapter 31 monthly living stipend with Chapter 33. We have seen instances where veterans would benefit more from VR&E services opt into Chapter 33 Post-9/11 GI Bill solely for the monthly living allotment. By matching Chapter 31's living stipend to Chapter 33, veterans can choose the program that is best for their future and not what pays most in living stipend presently.

Second, we recommend updating the program's name. The term "rehabilitation" had a different meaning in 1918 when the program was adopted. At this time rehabilitation meant the restoration of someone into a useful place in society. Today, that same dictionary defines rehabilitation as rehabilitating someone who is a criminal or needs drug or alcohol assistance. Because of the connotations behind the word rehabilitation or rehab, Voc Rehab, we recommend VA look at alternative language that is more appropriate in today's world. It would be unfortunate if a veteran overlooked this program due to confusion regarding the term "rehabilitation."

Lastly, we recommend that the VR&E self-employment track is revamped to promote more usage among the veteran population. The VR&E self-employment track is for veterans who have limited access to traditional employment and might need a flexible work environment to accommodate disabilities. It empowers veterans to enter into entrepreneurship roles.

In this program, veterans receive assistance to start their own business, to include access to start-up funds. And, as you know, access to capital is considered one of the biggest barriers of entry for starting a small business.

Wounded Warrior Project's mission not only assists veterans with disabilities, but allows them to live the most productive lives possible; many times, this means connecting them with meaningful employment.

We would like to thank the Committee for their time today and look forward to any questions you may have regarding our oral or written testimony. Thank you.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF DEREK FRONABARGER APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Fronabarger.

Mr. Villanueva, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF JEREMY VILLANUEVA

Mr. VILLANUEVA. Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting DAV to testify at this oversight hearing to discuss the program management, outcomes, effectiveness, and needs of VR&E.

I testify before you today not just as an advocate for disabled veterans, but also as a successful outcome of VR&E. As a veteran of the United States Marine Corps, I had utilized my educational benefits under the Post-9/11 GI Bill and attained a bachelor's degree at Cal State Bakersfield in 2013. However, due in part to my disabilities, I could not obtain gainful employment. When I was hired in DAV in 2014, I was enrolled VR&E, provided a vocational plan that took into consideration my service-connected conditions, and assisted in my first 16 months of employment as a National Service Officer, where I personally helped veterans with their VA claims, to include VR&E benefits.

I completed NSO training in 2015 and began a series of promotions that led me to DAV's legislative staff. This is one example of how VR&E can help a veteran find the path to economic success that is best suited for the individual.

VR&E reported in 2017 that approximately 90 percent of veterans who have achieved rehabilitation were employed in the past year and that the rate of home ownership was higher than the general population of the United States. Combine this with reported income that are at least $18,000 higher than for those who discontinued the program. VR&E is proving to be a valuable resource to America's disabled veteran, but there are some areas to improve upon and, despite data showing how beneficial VR&E can be, participation rates are down.

VA's budget request shows that it will meet the 1-to-125 counselor-to-veteran ratio; however, the latest data and the VA budget document shows that from 2016 to 2018 the number of VR&E participants fell by 5 percent and caseload declined by 8.4 percent, which raised some questions. Is VR&E able to meet this goal by serving fewer veterans? Has VR&E instituted any new policies or practices that have deterred disabled veterans from seeking these services? And what action is VA taking to increase awareness of the availability and benefits of VR&E services?

We are concerned that VA's hiring of new counselors to strengthen the program and increase services to disabled veterans is being negated by utilizing these counselors to do administrative tasks.

While the request for 70 additional FTE is encouraging, the total FTE will only be raised by four. So where will the additional 70 counselors come from?

VA noted in its assessment of the teleconferencing pilot program that VRCs who participated in the pilot had to assume duties that were generally completed by support staff, like the scheduling of appointments, monitoring of attendance, sending 10-day letters, et cetera. Increasing counselors, but losing other essential staff, undercuts the benefit of achieving the 125-to-1 ratio.

Mr. Chairman, VR&E has improved the lives of thousands of disabled veterans, yet rural and economically disadvantaged veterans continue to have barriers to access these benefits. This past March, VR&E extended tele-counseling services nationwide to over 1,000 counselors. We are encouraged that VR&E has taken steps to reduce travel times to both veterans and VRCs alike, facilitate better case management, and help veterans to obtain their benefits more efficiently. It should be noted, though, that this program should remain an option for veterans and not standard protocol.

In addition, VR&E suffers from a lack of resources and funding, an issue we believe to be due in part to a lack of leadership whose entire focus is on the economic opportunity programs. DAV is extremely pleased that the House passed a bill that would create a new fourth administration of the VA, but we need to work together to ensure that it makes it through the Senate during this Congress.

In order to further strengthen VA's education, economic opportunities and transition programs, to include VR&E, DAV supports the creation of this fourth administration, which would be made up of the VBA programs currently under the purview of the Office of Economic Opportunity. This new administration would include critical programs such as VR&E, the GI Bill, and TAP for transition servicing veterans.

For VR&E to fully reach its potential, it needs a leadership structure whose success rests solely on the success of the economic opportunity programs. The creation of this fourth administration would provide a greater accountability to Congress when problems such as low participation rates and the misallocation of resources come to light.

In addition, by having an Under Secretary who is held accountable for the actions of VR&E and other EO programs, greater oversight can be accomplished, and results improved.

Mr. Chairman, VR&E has shown time and time again that it is a useful resource for service-disabled veterans who are looking to utilize their given skills and talents to improve their quality of life. We look forward to working with this Subcommittee to make sure that VR&E continues to ease and expand access to this important resource for America's disabled veterans.

This concludes my testimony, and, on behalf of DAV, I would be happy to answer any questions you or other Members of the Subcommittee may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF JEREMY VILLANUEVA APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Villanueva.

Mr. Henry, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF STEVEN HENRY

Mr. HENRY. Good morning. Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, Paralyzed Veterans of America appreciates this opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee about the effectiveness of the Department of Veterans Affairs Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment programs, VR&E.

We often hear how great and beneficial VR&E is, but the number of veterans eligible for the benefit compared to those who use it suggests there is a clear lack of communication and outreach to all eligible veterans. In fiscal year 2018, roughly 4.75 million veterans had service-connected disabilities, but less than 3 percent of them utilized VR&E services.

If you were to ask the average veteran about VA benefits, most could explain key elements of the disability compensation program, but very few know basic facts about VR&E.

PVA believes that the effectiveness of VA's VR&E programs could be greatly improved through a number of changes that include greater outreach to veterans to raise awareness about the benefit, continued collaboration with outside agencies and programs, and increased follow-up time with participants.

PVA has found that VR&E usage throughout our membership is rather low. We do not believe this is due to a lack of interest, but rather a lack of understanding of how the program works. One PVA member recently noted that he learned about the program only after he had returned to the workforce following his injury. Another was vaguely aware of the program, but thought he was no longer eligible, even though he had actually retained eligibility. These are common occurrences. And it is possible that the program is being overshadowed by the Forever GI Bill, which is widely advertised through a multitude of venues.

A veteran's eligibility period for receiving services from VR&E is for 12 years beginning on either, one, the date of separation from military service or, two, the date the veteran receives a disability rating. To receive services, a veteran must need vocational rehabilitation to overcome employment barriers due to a service-connected disability. For veterans who have incurred a catastrophic disability, the 12-year delimiting date may not be sufficient to allow them to meet their vocational/rehabilitation goals.

Furthermore, many of these veterans have disabilities that may continue to evolve and worsen over time, which may cause them to need additional assistance. Although a VR&E counselor may waive the 12-year limit for veterans with serious employment barriers, veterans living with the wounds, injuries, and illnesses associated with military service should have certainty that if they need assistance in staying in or returning to the workforce in the future that this program will be there to assist them.

As a result of the barriers to employment faced by our members, PVA launched its own vocational rehabilitation and employment program in 2007, Paving Access for Veterans Employment, or PAVE. PAVE serves all veterans nationwide using a hybrid integrated approach to assist veterans and transitioning servicemembers who face significant barriers to employment, as well as their spouses and caregivers.

Collaborating with public and private partners is an important way to ensure that veterans with disabilities will be able to receive the services and supports needed to allow them to build successful employment outcomes. VR&E must continue to do community outreach to find experienced, credible partners to meet gaps that will result in more veterans with disabilities being placed in competitive, integrated employment sooner.

VR&E counselors typically follow veterans for 60 days once they are placed in a job. PVA believes that at the very least VR&E should study whether or not the current tracking standard of 60 days is sufficient follow-up time. For employees with probationary periods over 60 days, longer follow-up time may allow for problems that could lead to dismissal to be addressed, resulting in the veteran remaining employed. Regardless of the length of a probationary period, if any, it makes sense to increase the follow-up time to ensure that the veteran has the support, if needed, to ensure a successful transition to the workforce. That is why our PAVE counselors conduct ongoing follow-up for our veterans placed through our program. Long-term support may be needed to help a veteran with a catastrophic disability to not only successfully transition back to the workforce, but also to remain in the workforce.

In conclusion, without the proper services and supports, veterans with catastrophic disabilities are in danger of falling out of the workforce permanently. Such a loss means decreased financial security and social opportunities. VA's VR&E program provides critical access to needed services and supports for veterans with service-connected disabilities. An investment in VR&E is an investment in helping veterans with disabilities return to work, and ensuring their long-time rehabilitation and success.

PVA thanks the Subcommittee for the opportunity to express our views and I welcome any follow-up questions you may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF STEVEN HENRY APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Henry.

Finally, Ms. Ang, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF TANYA ANG

Ms. ANG. Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. At Veterans Education Success, we work to advance higher education success from military affiliated students. We believe holistic support and access to high quality post-secondary education and training for workforce development increases vocational opportunities for those who have served our country.

VR&E is a crucial program that does just this, as it provides support for veterans and servicemembers with service-connected disabilities through individualized plans that help them prepare for, obtain, and maintain suitable employment.

I would like to bring to the Committee's attention the following three areas that deserve attention: technology; ways to improve the role of vocational rehabilitation counselors; and the need for parity.

First, technology. The last time the case management system for VR&E was updated was in 1997. Complaints from school adminis-

trators around the country have revolved around the challenges certifying officials face with, what one administrator referred to as the black hole of certification.

Student veterans have gone up to 6 months without receiving payments, causing undue financial hardship. When SCOs contact regional offices for updates, they are left with little information and much frustration, as they work to find ways to provide answers and support for their student veterans struggling to stay in school.

VBA has proactively made this issue a priority over the last year, and based on recent conversations we have had with the VR&E office, we remain cautiously optimistic. With recent challenges VA OI&T has experienced with its last attempt to modernize the current system, and the recent rollout of sections of the Harry W. Colmery Act, we urge careful consideration and oversight from Congress.

Second, veteran resource counselors. We applied VBA's concerted effort to reduce the number of clients per counselor, but question the current legislative mandate of 125 clients to one counselor. The program offers individualized support specific to the needs and challenges of each client. This type of support is necessary, yet the time it takes to provide such support and follow-up can be labor intensive. We encourage the Committee to further explore whether the current client to counselor ratio is realistic and consider decreasing the congressionally mandated ratio.

We are also concerned about the recent news of James King, a VR&E counselor who pleaded guilty to bribery, fraud, and obstruction for demanding and receiving bribes from three for profit schools in exchange for steering veterans to those schools. While this example is clearly egregious in nature, it is important to ensure counselors are not in positions where significant conflicts of interest exist. It also highlights the power and influence current legislation gives to counselors.

I have supported a number of students who were admitted into top tier universities, as well as low quality schools that did not produce the same vocational outcomes. Because the lower quality school accepted one credit of physical education from the student's joint services transcript, the counselor only approved the individual to choose the lower quality school because it would be more cost effective.

Not all colleges are created equal. A veteran's career and earnings trajectory are significantly enhanced by attending a college that offers high quality and better respect in the—high quality education and better respect in the job market. Consistency in guidelines and expectations for counselors is important, as is ongoing training and allowing veterans a more prominent voice in the institution or program of study they choose to pursue.

We encourage the Committee to institute higher benchmark counselors should consider for a program's quality, including considering college outcome metrics, using readily available Federal data.

In a Government Accountability Office report, veterans cited challenges with their counselor's inability to help them translate their military service into Federal civilian employment, and frustration that a counselor did not adequately describe the physical

challenges of the job, given the veteran's service-connected disabilities.

Veterans using the VR&E program are supported by their counselors to develop individualized plans following one of five tracks. The counselor is expected to be a subject matter expert on each of these issues. This seems unattainable for any one person. VES agrees with GAO's recommendation to conduct field research to identify and publish promising practices for field offices.

Third, parity. With the passage of the Forever GI bill, Congress removed the 15 year delimiting date and included restoration of entitlement to students due to school closures. We agree with our colleagues who have called for the removal of the 12 year delimiting date. We also believe those using VR&E should have the same restoration of entitlement as their peers using the post-9/11 GI bill, should a school they are attending close.

We also ask the Committee to consider moving the program to only one subsistence rate, instead of the two that currently exist. Doing so would reduce beau acracy, eliminate confusion, and create better parity for those using the program.

Finally, we believe this program needs more transparency and that the GI comparison tool might be an optimal place to house information for both programs. I appreciate the Committee's continued commitment on this program and look forward to answering any further questions you might have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF TANYA ANG APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Ms. Ang. I now recognize myself for 5 minutes.

Many of you have raised the need for greater promotion of VR&E to increase awareness among eligible veterans. Question for each of you, would you agree that these discussions about VR&E, the marketing effort, if you will, should take place during the transition assistance program or are there other venues that you would recommend as well? You can go in no—

Mr. MURRAY. Sir, I think both. I think that more information any way we can get it out there. I think that in the TAP class, it is mentioned, but there is not a healthy discussion about it. As mentioned, the Forever GI Bill, you hear about it all over the place. You don't hear about it on social media the same way that Voc rehab is. So I think that there is multiple ways you can spread the information.

Mr. FRONABARGER. I would agree with my colleague. I think TAP is a great venue for that. Social media can also assist a lot in trying to promote this program, but also looking at it before TAP is even in the mind set. So allowing servicemembers to know what sort of programs are out there if they were to transition out is also an option.

Mr. LEVIN. Do you want to just keep going down the line?

Mr. VILLANUEVA. Yes, Mr. Chairman. I would like to reemphasize what my colleagues have said and want to actually expand on it. Not only should it be mentioned at TAP for the outgoing, the transitioning the brand new veteran, but also you can really talk about expanding the VSOC program, the VSOCs as on the other

end of that with these veterans who are at the schools and are not able to be around at least a vet center or an RO. Because currently—take California for example, Mr. Chairman. I will use that.

Only three of the CSUs has a counselor at their school. And none of those are rural. All three of those CSUs: San Diego State, Cal State Long Beach, and Cal State Los Angeles, which all are within semi-reasonable access of a VARO. What about Cal State Bakersfield, or Fresno State? You know, these ones should have it as well so that they could tell the students who are already there, "Hey, these are the benefits that are also available to you."

Mr. HENRY. I also agree with my colleagues. Definitely, it needs to be more of a broader portion in TAP. But I would also say that as the 12 year delimiting date is removed, we need to do more outreach for the older veterans. And that includes a large portion of our membership. A lot of them are older.

Definitely, as was mentioned before, social media, LinkedIn. LinkedIn is a huge platform and I see veterans looking for job assistance every single day. But also possibly going into SCI centers because we have—our membership, the veterans that have to spend time in the SCI centers, they could benefit greatly from some of the programs for Voc rehab.

Ms. ANG. I agree with all of my colleagues here. I actually had highlighted VSOC counselors as well. I do think we need to increase that program, and they are a great way to disseminate some of the information to veterans who might be eligible for VR&E that are not even aware of it, and as well as the partnerships with other veterans and military groups who can help disseminate similar information.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you. Also, many of you alluded to the fact that it is not enough to help veterans just secure initial employment, but we really need to invest in ensuring they have lasting and fulfilling careers. Towards that end, I would like to learn more about the suggestions to improve follow up after veterans get placed in the job market. For no one in particular, anyone can weigh in on this, what information should be captured on follow up and how frequently should this occur?

Mr. FRONABARGER. So using our own program as a base, we actually follow up after employment at the 30, 60, 190, and 365. We don't consider it a successful employment unless they stay in that job for one year. At that time, we ask how satisfied they are. We know that satisfaction is incredibly important in making sure that there is successful retention within that job. So those are some of the suggestions we would recommend if you were to look at that.

Mr. LEVIN. Anyone else care to weigh in on that?

Mr. VILLANUEVA. Yes, so DAV does have a resolution where we look to support the extension of the period of employment services under voc rehab, because currently under Title 38, United States Code 3105, that allows veterans counseling and placement for the post-placement services for an additional period not to exceed 18 months, unless it was determined by the secretary that it would need more.

Now, we all want to see the veteran succeed, and so we would—we do support the extension of those services, absolutely.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you. Out of time, but want to thank you all for your work and look forward to continuing to work with you to continue to improve this program for veterans. So with that, I'll turn it over to the Ranking Member, Mr. Bilirakis.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate it. And this is for the panel. What is your view of the current management structure for VR&E? Do you believe that a regional review or some type of increased line authority focus is needed to improve performance? We can start from here, please.

Mr. MURRAY. Thank you, sir. I think one of the things that we should focus on is a little bit better reporting and oversight based on the regional offices, having a national 1 to 125 client to counselor ratio is great, but I think if it is reported at the local levels, that would help focus attention for management and oversight to see which regional offices were maybe above or below that.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Yes. Anyone else? Please.

Mr. FRONABARGER. I would agree with my colleague with VFW. Currently, we are seeing a lot of changes, especially in the IT section with the VR&E office. We would definitely recommend that from the leadership down to relay, we have heard some of the local counselors saying these are a lot of changes in a short amount of time. But with that, the reporting structure, we would recommend just streamline that information down a little bit easier.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Anyone else? Yes, sir.

Mr. VILLANUEVA. Yeah, I would like to reiterate what my colleague at VFW said. We do support changing the reporting of the ratio to reflect the VA regional offices, instead of a nationwide client to counselor ratio, and so that would help address the needs of specific offices and more directly help veterans.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Thank you. Yes, sir.

Mr. HENRY. I would say in regards to PVA, our usage with VR&E is just so low, we just have few members that use the program that I would—I will take the question for the record because I just don't think that we have enough experience with the program to really comment on management structure.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Thank you.

Ms. ANG. I would say based off of the 2014 GAO report, and then having spoken with a number of school administrators who work with us on a daily basis, there does need to be more focus on the regional offices. There seems to be some offices that are doing exceptionally well and others that are really struggling. And to have some sort of accountability and transparency related to each office, I think would really help even VA, the proper, to hold them accountable and kind of address those issues at a more localized level.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Okay. Thank you. That was very helpful. Mr. Villanueva, I am sorry I messed up the name, Villanueva, sorry, and Mr. Murray, can you please discuss your concerns about the drop in participation in the VR&E program and how this drop may have led to the 1 per 125 veterans to counselor ratio being achieved? I know that you talked about it a little bit, but elaborate a little more. We will start with Mr. Villanueva, please. Thank you.

Mr. VILLANUEVA. Thank you, Mr. Ranking Member. And it is—don't worry. It takes me some time to say it myself.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Well, I should know better. I apologize.

Mr. VILLANUEVA. It is fine. No, we do have some concerns and it was—I know it was brought up at a prior hearing where the deputy undersecretary, she noted her concerns of it as well because looking at the numbers that Department of Labor is putting out and that the Bureau of Labor Statistics is putting out, and how this same core group of veterans that utilizes VR&E, the Gulf War to our veterans that are roughly my age, late 20s, mid to late 30s, they are actually on the rise. However, the participation rates and the caseload is declining.

Now, if the decline matches up with their now new 1 to 125 ratio, that is going to be a concern. We want every veteran who can utilize this be able to utilize it and know about it. And we don't believe that this is a good trend, especially since all—according to the longitudinal studies in all the other cohorts, it was—the usership and caseload was dramatically on the rise and for it to now all of a sudden drop, not precipitously, but definitely have a drop, this is something that we would want Congress to take a look at.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Thank you. Mr. Murray, what do you attribute the decline to?

Mr. MURRAY. So we are actually afraid that lack of attention for this program over years attributed to lack of outreach, lack of knowledge about it, lack of the counselors having the ability to properly manage their caseload. Not hiring the additional employees from the 2016 public law that passed for two years we think affected the program and the participation rates.

As my colleague said, the rates were climbing steadily and to see them drop, there needs to be a better explanation for the lack of attention over the years and now hopefully that we are putting a spotlight on it, we are going to see those numbers start to rise again.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Good. One last question, Mr. Chairman, is that fine? I know I have a couple seconds here. Mr. Villanueva, what is your view of the tele-counseling program? I think this is important. Do you believe that this new tool can provide greater accessibility to VR&E services to disabled veterans? I know Mr. Pappas asked the question as well. I think it is a key, I mean, in telehealth, in tele-mental health as well, but in this particular case, how effective would it be?

Mr. VILLANUEVA. Thank you, Mr. Ranking Member, and I couldn't emphasize this more, that it is definitely a key, especially for reaching those who are in more rural communities. However, the pilot did show that it was 58 percent who chose not to do it, and the overriding reason, one of the two main reasons was because they wanted that face to face with their counselor. So we need to ensure that that is still maintained for the veteran as well.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Good point. Thank you very much. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Ranking Member. I would now like to recognize Ms. Rice for 5 minutes.

Ms. RICE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Ms. Ang, is that how you say your—Ang?

Ms. ANG. Ang.

Ms. RICE. Ang. Ms. Ang, in terms of the ratio, I think it is something that every single one of you have spoken about, and I think we really have to drill down and figure out how we figure out—I know Mr. Villanueva, you had said that maybe the—the numbers should be driven by the region, and the need, and that as one of the driving factors. But Ms. Ang, you had said that the numbers should be closer to 85 I believe you said. So maybe you can talk—if you could talk about that, and then anyone else on the panel who has any thoughts about how we—because if you—if we can't get to the bottom of this, what is the point of the program?

Ms. ANG. Correct. I based that off of the knowledge necessary to be able to support a military connected student as they are going through the VR&E program. And having worked as an academic advisor within a higher ed institution, 85 was typically the number that would provide the best results for client—for student to counselor ratio. Academic advisors often provide similar, more focused guidelines related to workforce. You know, what career are you going to pursue after you finish this degree. And so then what is the right degree for you to pursue that—or what is the right program of study for you to pursue that career trajectory.

And based on that experience and in other experience with working—I oversaw another program that worked with severely injured at Walter Reed as they were in the process of recovery to get them into top tier schools using their Voc rehab. And we found that, again, the smaller client to counselor ratio provided a better return on investment and results.

We believe VA has been conducting some research in that area and I think that their numbers were close to that. That hasn't been published yet. And so we felt that that was just an estimated guess, but probably a highly educated one.

Ms. RICE. Well, I mean, you talk, and rightly so, about the nature of how time intensive the interaction between each individual client and a counselor is. And I guess depending on the specific needs of the client, but also I think we should put a huge emphasis on training of the counselors as well because the more trained and the better trained they are, the faster without sacrificing—we can be more efficient without sacrificing the quality of the care that is given to the clients.

Mr. Villanueva, if you want to talk more about what you had mentioned before about the geographic specificity or in terms of the ratio.

Mr. VILLANUEVA. Thank you, ma'am. Yes, I would love to talk about that. And one, like my colleague said, addressed, some regional offices being more efficient than the others and some giving out the services. And also the need, rural areas, of course, are not getting the same. However, I want to stress when it comes to the nailing down a number, the 1 to 125 or the 1 to 85. And as I stated in my oral testimony, and also in our written testimony, one of the things that we are worried about is that becoming a metric that the VR&E is shooting for over the services provided to the veteran.

If they are hiring all of these counselors and then using them to replace service staff, doing administrative tasks, then we are losing out—these disabled veterans are losing out on services and time that the counselors should be used by giving it to them. So—

Ms. RICE. That is a good point.

Mr. VILLANUEVA [continued]. —we would always want to be very careful on what it is and putting too much of an emphasis on that actual number. We will always look to see a greater client to counselor ratio, that level to go down. However, the most important part is the services to this—to these disabled veterans. And like I said, I was an example of what they can do for the individual veteran and having them achieve the success that they deserve.

Ms. RICE. So I just want to thank the Chairman for holding this hearing with Mr. Streitberger, is that how you say your name, and all of you present because you have the management, who is trying to implement the program and all of you who are hearing firsthand from the clients about the pros and cons of the program.

And I just—so I thank you, Mr. Chairman, for putting everyone in the same room because this is where all of you have to agree that you are going to work—and us too up here are going to work toward having this program work, not just for management so that their numbers and they get the credit for getting their numbers where they need to be, and all of you being advocates for your constituencies.

This is really, really important that we are all here talking about this in the same room so that we can have accountability at the end of the day and ultimately service the clients who need it. So I just want to thank you all very much, you, Mr. Streitberger, for staying and hearing what everyone has to say, and all of you for participating. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Ms. Rice. And I have to also thank our great staff for making sure that everybody was able to be gathered here this morning. I would now like to recognize Mr. Cunningham for 5 minutes.

Mr. CUNNINGHAM. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to each and every one of the witnesses who have come here to testify today and for the service you all provide to your respective organizations and the service you provide to our veterans. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Mr. Fronabarger, it is good to see another South Carolinian here today. Welcome to D.C.

Mr. FRONABARGER. Thank you.

Mr. CUNNINGHAM. And you are from the district, right? You are from the low country?

Mr. FRONABARGER. That's correct. Born and raised in Charleston.

Mr. CUNNINGHAM. Okay, excellent. Nice to have you here. And I don't have to tell you that objectively speaking, we have the most beautiful district in the entire country, and it is partly that because we have such a high number of veterans living there as well. It is the highest concentration of veterans in the entire state of South Carolina, which I am sure you are aware of, right?

Mr. FRONABARGER. Correct. And I think that is a fact, the most beautiful.

Mr. CUNNINGHAM. I concur and now that is part of the record, we can move on. And we have a great VA facility there. I stopped by there on Sunday afternoon and saw some of the staff and people keeping that one of the best facilities.

But, you know, our VA also has some challenges and it has difficulty recruiting and retaining employees. And in your testimony, you mentioned that VRCs often have difficulty finding Federal employment opportunities for participants. So I like your idea of a pilot program to streamline the interested veterans into open positions at the VA. Could you provide a little bit more detail on how you would envision this program being designed?

Mr. FRONABARGER. Definitely, Congressman. I appreciate that question. As you know, the VA hospital in Charleston is quite large. There is also a good amount of schools around there: College of Charleston, Trident Tech, and then the Medical University of South Carolina. It really comes down to a number's game. You have 45,000 open vacancies at the VA, and you have about 115,000 people currently enrolled in the VR&E program.

What we would like to see is a pilot program that if a counselor was to identify a nurse that was about to graduate or a police officer that was about to graduate and indicated that they were interested in working at the VA, they didn't have to jump through the same hoops, go on USA Jobs. They could say hey, the left hand, being the vocational rehabilitation counselor, speaks to the right hand, which is the VA HR representative saying, "I have got a few individuals that might be interested, can we fast track them or at least get their background checked and their applications through before they graduate?"

Mr. CUNNINGHAM. And obviously South Carolina being a prime location to implement that with all of the technical schools, and the education facilities. Do you think that pilot program could fall under one of the existing tracks under the vocational rehab program or was this an entirely new one that would need to be established?

Mr. FRONABARGER. I think it could probably—it could definitely fall under one of the existing tracks. For individuals going to school, I think this is a good option for them.

Mr. CUNNINGHAM. And so this essentially just puts people within that program with other schools, universities, or organizations and has a constant open line of communication, I guess, with that recruiting process, correct?

Mr. FRONABARGER. That is absolutely correct. I think the ultimate goal is since the VA is investing in these veterans, to try and find meaningful employment and at the same time while they are looking for qualified veterans to fill these open positions, there should definitely be some communication there.

Mr. CUNNINGHAM. I appreciate your testimony. I appreciate your time in coming here today, as with the rest of you all, and I yield back. Thank you.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Cunningham. And you are always welcome to visit California's 49th district, which includes La Jolla, the beautiful VA at La Jolla. Our guests from the low country certainly welcome as well, as is everyone else. I think we have got the second most veterans in the United States, but according to the VA, we will have—San Diego region will soon have the most. But no doubt we are—Mr. Cunningham, we are very fortunate, both of us, to represent beautiful coastal districts.

If there are no further questions, I want to echo the comments of many of my colleagues. We are truly grateful to you for the work that you do on behalf of our veterans and for the collaborative nature of this morning's hearing. We look forward to hearing from each of you in the weeks and months ahead about the ongoing collaboration around VR&E. And I would like to thank the Ranking Member as well, and all of the Members who asked excellent questions.

All Members have 5 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks, and include additional materials. Again, I thank everyone for coming. And without objection, this Subcommittee stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:12 p.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

Prepared Statement of William Streitberger

Good morning, Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss Evaluating the Effectiveness of VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program. I am deeply honored and privileged to appear before you today not only as the Executive Director of the VR&E program but as a proud recipient of this benefit and alumnus. I would not be testifying before you today had it not been for the tremendous contribution this program has had on my personal and professional life. Today, I am excited to share with you VR&E's historic modernization efforts to provide program participants with the benefits they have earned in a manner that honors their service.

VR&E Program Overview and Management

The mission of the VR&E program is to assist Servicemembers and Veterans with service-connected disabilities and barriers to employment prepare for, find, and maintain suitable employment. Rehabilitation services provided to VR&E participants fall under one of the following five tracks:

- **Reemployment with Previous Employer:** For individuals who are separating from active duty or in the National Guard or Reserves and are returning to work for their previous employer.
- **Rapid Access to Employment:** For individuals who either wish to obtain employment soon after separation or who already have the necessary skills to be competitive in the job market in an appropriate occupation.
- **Self-Employment:** For individuals who have limited access to traditional employment, need flexible work schedules, or who require more accommodation in the work environment due to their disabling conditions or other life circumstances.
- **Employment Through Long-Term Services:** For individuals who need specialized training and/or education to obtain and maintain suitable employment.
- **Independent Living Services:** For individuals who are not currently able to work and need rehabilitation services to live more independently.

Ninety-six percent of program participants are currently in the Employment through Long-Term Services track. Given that most Veterans in the VR&E program require significant support and re-training to obtain a suitable job, it stands to reason that this is the most widely used employment track. The services provided under this track include payment of all training costs, associated fees, books, supplies, and other required resources that are necessary for achievement of a suitable career goal.

Generally, Veterans must complete a program within 12 years from their separation from military service or within 12 years from the date VA notifies them that they have a compensable service-connected disability. Depending on the length of program needed, Veterans may be provided up to 48 months of full-time services or their part-time equivalent. These limitations may be extended in certain circumstances.

Currently, there are nearly 1,100 professional Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (VRC) who deliver services through a network of nearly 350 field locations reporting up to their Regional Office (RO) of jurisdiction. These offices support Servicemembers and Veterans where they are located which currently includes 56 ROs, the National Capital Regional Benefits Office (NCRBO), approximately 142 VR&E out-based offices, 71 military installations for the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES), and 104 VetSuccess On Campus schools/sites.

VR&E works with VBA's Office of Field Operations to provide oversight, policy guidance, communications, and advice to the field structure. As the Executive Director of VR&E, I communicate with the field on a daily basis and am heavily involved

in all aspects of VR&E program field operations. Since coming on board in September 2018, I have instituted a comprehensive Change Management strategy to support Servicemembers, Veterans, family members, employees, and key stakeholders through the modernization process. I have traveled throughout the country conducting modernization townhalls to share VR&E's vision for program excellence and to engage in discussion with both VA Central Office and operational staff on key topics of interest and concern and solicit critical input to help guide and shape the future of our program. These listening sessions have included customer-centered design focus groups with student Veterans who have been instrumental in informing and shaping the modernization process. I will continue to do this at every possible opportunity. VR&E has a Field Advisory and Change Committee (FACC) that is actively involved in rolling out the vision and messaging key changes and new initiatives. FACC meets once each quarter.

There are three significant initiatives currently underway to strengthen VR&E's ability to monitor and ensure proper program execution and compliance. First, in partnership with our District Offices, the VR&E program office (in VACO) will expand its ability to provide program oversight by 80 percent, in partnership with our District Offices. Our new model will ensure collaborative oversight of each RO, every fiscal year. Second, VR&E's Quality Assurance (QA) Transformation will increase program effectiveness and efficiency through new instruments tailored to better evaluate compliance and performance using an issue-based scoring methodology, a statistically valid sampling methodology, and a revised QA Web system where both the local and national reviews will be completed in the same system to allow for comparative analysis. QA modernization will enable us to get a more accurate picture of the performance of our program and the areas needed for targeted training of staff at the national, RO, and individual level. Third, technology initiatives will increase our capability to monitor and assess program operations, enforce compliance, expand access controls, drive higher quality outcomes, and eliminate service delivery inconsistencies.

VR&E Program Outcomes

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2018, our highly skilled and dedicated counselors assisted 15,997 Veterans to achieve a positive outcome. This is an increase of 3 percent from Fiscal Year (FY) 2017 and includes the following:

- 10,735 Employment rehabilitations
- 597 Independent Living rehabilitations
- 794 Education rehabilitations
- 603 Maximum Rehabilitation Gain (MRG) - employed
- 3,268 Maximum Rehabilitation Gain - employable

MRGs account for where VR&E contributed substantively to a Veteran's success in achieving employment or continuing education, where the goal may differ from the original rehabilitation plan objective.

In addition, VR&E continued to engage, address, and resolve the number of program participants in a case status that has been open for more than 10 years. Since this initiative started in July 2015, program participants in this status decreased by 63 percent. This has helped in increasing the achievement of more positive outcomes.

VR&E has implemented a new program metric in FY 2019-the VR&E Program Growth Rate, which measures the percentage of Veterans who have been determined to be entitled to the program and enter a plan of services. This metric will help us focus on increasing participants in the program. To support increased program growth, we are preparing to deploy Artificial Intelligence capabilities to streamline appointment scheduling, reminders, and simplify other communication touch points. This is one of many optimization advancements we will discuss today.

FY 2019 marks the 10-year anniversary of the Vetsuccess on Campus (VSOC) program. The VSOC program began as a pilot in 2009; since then, the program has undergone multiple expansions. The most recent occurred in FY 2018 when an additional 8 VSOC counselors were assigned to 10 new schools in the country. The VSOC program now has 87 counselors, who serve 104 Institutions of Higher Learning across the country. In FY 2018, over 86,000 student Veterans, Servicemembers, and dependents attended a VSOC school and had access to a VSOC counselor. VSOC counselors provided services to 44,687 of these students.

VR&E continues to collaborate with the Department of Defense to provide VR&E services to Active Duty, Reserve, and National Guard Servicemembers through the IDES program. There are 145 IDES counselors at 71 military installations across the Nation. These counselors provide early intervention counseling and other available services to IDES participants and other wounded, ill, and injured

Servicemembers. In collaboration with the U.S. Army's Warrior Transition Command, staff members jointly visit select IDES sites to improve the referral process and services at these military installations. The Committee's long-term support for automatic VR&E entitlement for wounded, ill, and injured Servicemembers is greatly appreciated.

VR&E also continues to collaborate with the U.S. Department of Labor and the public workforce systems in each state and territory. Together, we work to ensure that enrolled Veterans receive labor market information to assist them in making informed decisions about selecting their rehabilitative training program. This referral process assists each Veteran in getting the best information and service available through each of these partners.

VR&E continues to support transitioning Servicemembers, Veterans, and qualified dependents who are eligible for VA education benefits. This program (Educational and Vocational Counseling) is authorized under title 38, United States Code, Chapter 36, and offers a wide range of services, including but not limited to adjustment counseling, vocational testing, educational and career counseling, and VA benefits coaching. These services are available to most Servicemembers within 6 months of their anticipated discharge, Veterans within 1-year post-discharge, or any Servicemember, Veteran, or dependent that is eligible for specified VA education benefits. VR&E is collaborating with the Office of Transition and Economic Development (TED) to create a new strategy and vehicle for contracted title 38, chapter 36, services currently managed by VR&E, which is responsive to the needs of student Veterans and transitioning Servicemembers. Chapter 36 benefits offer a wide range of educational and vocational counseling services to Servicemembers, Veterans, and dependents who are eligible for one of the VA's educational benefit programs.

Also, we have consistently heard Veterans say that they did not remember hearing about the VR&E program in their Transition Assistance Program (TAP) classes. While the TAP curriculum includes content on VR&E services, we recognize that we need to improve upon how this content is delivered. In previous testimony

Ms. Margarita Devlin, the Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Benefits, informed this committee that VA will be improving upon the TAP curriculum with the ability to add additional time based on the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act. VR&E Service is collaborating with TED to ensure that we incorporate Veteran feedback into the improvements to the VR&E program content.

Training for VR&E staff is a major focus; four new counselor training, instructor-led, and Web-based sessions have been conducted this fiscal year. Approximately 156 new counselors who were hired have attended these sessions. The training focused on policy and procedures and was designed to enhance the knowledge and skill sets of the newly-hired counselors.

VR&E Longitudinal Study

VR&E service has continued tracking Veteran cohorts in the congressionally mandated 20-year longitudinal study. This study of Veterans who began their VR&E programs in FY 2010, 2012, and 2014 has provided an abundance of information including detailed analysis of cohort trends and Veteran satisfaction with VR&E services. From last year's iteration of the study, we found that nearly 90 percent of participants for all cohorts reported moderate to high program satisfaction; women make up a larger percentage of the program participants (17–20 percent); and about two-thirds of cohort members have a service-connected disability rating of about 60 percent or higher. The study also revealed that almost one-quarter or more of participants in each cohort have a primary rating for posttraumatic stress disorder, and around 90 percent of Veterans who have achieved rehabilitation from an employment plan were employed in the past year. The study further indicates that Veterans who successfully complete the VR&E program report more positive economic outcomes to include higher employment rates, number of months worked, annual earnings, annual and individual income, and home ownership, as compared to those Veterans who discontinued their participation in the VR&E program over time.

Rehabilitation remains one of the most dominant variables driving positive financial outcomes. Therefore, we know that keeping our Veterans in the program until completion, is a key factor to their success. Our "Modernization and Transformation" efforts will greatly assist in improving rehabilitation outcomes.

VR&E Modernization & Transformation

VR&E has embarked on a comprehensive multi-year modernization effort to improve customer service by streamlining processes and modernizing systems. VR&E Service, in conjunction with the Office of Business Process Integration and the Office of Information and Technology (OIT), has developed and is moving forward with an overarching plan to incrementally modernize VR&E by streamlining several of

the administrative functions with existing technology solutions to include implementation of the Case Management Solution System (CMSS). CMSS will replace VR&E's existing 20-year old legacy system, Corporate Waco, Indianapolis, Newark, Roanoke, Seattle (CWINRS). Requests for information from industry in FY 2018 yielded valuable information on commercially available products. VR&E will leverage Software as a Service which will enable VR&E to grow with technology and reengineer processes to support digital and paperless initiatives. We anticipate award before the end of FY 2019 to acquire these capabilities.

Concurrently, VR&E is pursuing a wide-reaching modernization effort that will include numerous opportunities to incrementally leverage existing people, processes, and technology to more efficiently prepare us to seamlessly transition into the new CMSS. These include:

- **Virtual Assistant:** Artificial Intelligence platform which will enable routine bidirectional electronic communication with Veterans through either text message or email. This technology is readily available in the marketplace with similar applications successfully employed in other industries such as Medical, Hospitality, and Banking.
- **VA Video Connect:** The new VA Video Connect application for tele-counseling connects Veterans with their counselors from virtually anywhere, using encryption to ensure a secure and private session. The app makes VR&E appointments more convenient and reduces the travel time for Veterans, especially those in rural areas. It allows quick and easy access from any mobile or Web-based device (desktop, smartphone, or tablet). Tele-counseling is a service delivery option that provides the capability to meet Veterans on their terms, creating greater flexibility, convenience, and access. Since deployed in November 2018, VR&E has seen an increase in usage of over 200 percent averaging over 1,000 VA Video Connect appointments per month using this updated platform. It is clear that Veterans and VR&E counselors are embracing the functionality and flexibility that this option provides.
- **e-Invoicing:** The Invoice Payment Processing System (IPPS) is an electronic invoicing platform which will enable vendors to receive electronic authorizations from and submit electronic invoices directly to VR&E. Once implemented, this capability will standardize as well as streamline the invoice payment process, significantly reducing the amount of time needed to receive, process, and pay vendors.
- **Paperless Claims Processing:** This will enable VR&E to store electronic records within the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS) eFolder, enabling electronic access to Veteran case files, moving VR&E toward a paperless work environment. The initiative began in Quarter 1 of FY 2019. Shipping of closed files to the scanning vendor will enable these files to be digitized, labeled (taxonomy), and stored electronically in the VBMS eFolder. It also supports VBA's ability to test this process for VR&E records, system functionality, and will minimize impact on employees serving participants in an active case status. Once scanned, files will be easily accessible and readily available for case management in a fully-electronic claims processing environment. This builds upon existing investments in VBA's modernization efforts.
- **Centralized Mail:** Will expand and enhance available features of the current centralized mail process utilized by Compensation Service to develop a separate digital portal for VR&E mail. Centralized Mail will streamline the receipt, processing, and filing of received mail potentially reducing mail processing time by 75 percent. Physical mail will be received in a central location, scanned, and then disseminated to the receiving VR&E office through the dedicated VR&E Centralized Mail portal.

As VR&E implements these changes, counselors will be able to manage workload more efficiently and effectively, allowing more time to provide high-quality counseling and employment services to VR&E participants.

Concluding Remarks

Mr. Chairman, VR&E Service, leadership, and the field continue to move in the direction of modernizing and transforming this very consequential program. With the implementation of these initiatives between now and Quarter 1 FY 2021, VR&E will strive toward both substantially improving and enhancing the VR&E program. With the implementation of each component, we will assess the impact and improvement on the delivery of vocational rehabilitation services to our Servicemembers and Veterans with service-connected disabilities.

My vision is to continually challenge the status quo, to think differently to provide Veterans with the benefits they have earned in a manner that honors their service,

in the way they want to be served, that VR&E be a modern 21st Century facilitator of economic opportunity for Servicemembers, Veterans, and their families - the crown jewel of VBA's benefits portfolio.

This concludes my statement, Mr. Chairman. I would be pleased to answer any questions from you, the Ranking Member, and other members of the Subcommittee.

Prepared Statement of Patrick Murray

WITH RESPECT TO

Department of Veterans Affairs Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis and members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and its Auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to present our views on this important benefit.

The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Service (VR&E) provides critical counseling and other adjunct services necessary to enable service-disabled veterans to overcome barriers as they prepare for, find, and maintain gainful employment. VR&E offers services on five tracks: re-employment, rapid access to employment, self-employment, employment through long-term services, and independent living.

The VFW views VR&E as a critical tool in promoting success for our veterans. It is at the forefront in ensuring veterans can remain in the workforce and stay employed in meaningful careers. Once a veteran receives a disability rating, and cannot continue along their original path in the workforce, they must choose a different route for their career. This is where VR&E is critical because it helps veterans remain employed by providing training and education for an alternative career.

A vital part of the VR&E program is the counselors who assist veterans with their claims. The counselors are the key component in assisting veterans with their rehabilitation plan for VR&E. However, for VR&E counselors, training and standardization is the largest area of improvement needed for this program.

Far too often VFW service officers encounter veterans who are eligible to receive VR&E benefits but were originally denied by the VR&E counselors. The subjectivity of approving eligibility leads to veterans being denied the benefit, when in fact they should have been approved immediately. There needs to be a more standardized way to approve the eligibility of veterans, and further training of counselors, so recipients do not have to fight for a benefit they deserve.

Additionally, while the counselors should guide their clients towards making sound financial decisions with their VR&E benefit, we do not feel the counselors should deny claims based entirely on if there are cheaper alternatives. The counselors should work with their clients to prevent waste and abuse of the benefit, but veterans should be allowed to have some agency in where they receive their training. VR&E is not a blank check, but counselors should factor in the entirety of the training received and not simply the overall cost. The VFW was recently informed of a veteran facing difficulty with VR&E claims processing. The counselor is pressuring the student to attend a public non-profit university because it is cheaper than the private non-profit university the veteran would like to attend. Approving or denying claims based on cost does not serve the best interest of veterans who use the VR&E program.

VA budget documents state that the VR&E program will meet and sustain the congressionally mandated goal of 1:125 counselor-to client ratio. However, the latest data in the VA budget document also shows that from 2016 to 2018, the number of VR&E participants fell from 173,606 to 164,355—more than a five percent decrease. During that same period, VR&E's caseload also dropped from 137,097 to 125,513—an 8.4 percent decline. It would appear that VR&E is able to meet the 1:125 goal by serving fewer veterans. We understand that there have been major changes and upgrades to the entire program, which would enable veterans who were unable to use or were unaware of their VR&E benefits. VA must consider whether more staff is needed to meet such increased demand.

The VFW supports adding more VR&E counselors on military installations, and also on college campuses. The Veteran Success on Campus (VSOC) program is an incredibly valuable resource for those utilizing the VR&E benefit at colleges. Currently, there are VR&E counselors on 71 military installations and 104 VSOC representatives on campuses. Given how positive the feedback is from both universities and students, the VFW urges Congress and VA to expand this program to as many locations as possible.

While VR&E is an employment program, it is commonly used for training on college campuses. The processing of VR&E claims to universities is where we hear about a lot of VR&E problems. The processing of chapter 31 claims takes months to go through the system leaving some universities without payment for multiple semesters. In some cases, students are not allowed further enrollment until payments are made, and in others, students are being counseled to voluntarily not enroll until the delayed payments are made. The delays in processing VR&E payments are negatively affecting users of this program. This problem must to be rectified immediately.

Another obstacle in utilizing the VR&E program is the 12-year delimitating date for eligibility. Counselor have the ability to waive that requirement, so it is not as much a barrier for acceptance, as it is a barrier for veterans seeking to apply. A common complaint we hear from our members when we recommend VR&E is that do not think they are eligible because they are past the 12-year window. We urge Congress to pass H.R. 444, which would eliminate the 12-year delimitating date for eligibility and provide veterans vocational rehabilitation for life. Service-disabled veterans must be authorized to receive access to VR&E services at any point during their employable lives when service-connected disabilities interfere with their employment, but also as the economy changes to learn new employable skills.

Another improvement the VFW would like to see is expanded tracking of veterans who complete their VR&E goals. Attaining employment after completing the program is important, but sustaining that employment is equally important. Tracking the long term success of veterans can help to build improvements into the program to better help current and future VR&E users. We suggest adding to the VR&E program a follow on service that checks in with VR&E participants at certain dates once they have completed the program, to ensure the program was ultimately successful.

Finally, the VFW calls upon VA to better explain VR&E and its uses before service members separate during the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). A consistent complaint from our members is they were unaware of the VR&E program, and who is eligible for it. A lot of disinformation is spread by word of mouth, and there is a lot of confusion about eligibility, and exactly how the program can be used. Some veterans are approved to use VR&E to attain advanced degrees, and others are denied the same opportunity. The flexibility of VR&E is one of the best parts of the program, but not having standardized usages leads to a lot of confusion and resentment towards VA. A more robust discussion of the program within TAP classes would help mitigate some of the confusion surrounding VR&E and may guide more veterans towards using it if there is better information presented earlier.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. Again, the VFW thanks you and the Ranking Member for the opportunity to testify on these important issues before this Subcommittee. I am prepared to take any questions you or the Subcommittee members may have.

Prepared Statement of Derek Fronabarger

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and distinguished members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, thank you for inviting Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) to testify on the effectiveness of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program.

Wounded Warrior Project's mission is to honor and empower the wounded, ill, and injured service members and veterans of the Post-9/11 generation. Through community partnerships and free direct programming, WWP is filling gaps in government services that reflect the risks and sacrifices that our most recent generation of veterans faced while in service. Through more than a dozen direct-service programs, we connect these individuals with one another and their communities; we serve them by providing mental health support and clinical treatment, physical health and wellness programs, job placement services, and benefits claims help; and we empower them to succeed and thrive in their communities. We communicate with this community on a weekly basis and are constantly striving to be as effective and efficient as possible by matching our programs - and our advocacy before Congress - to meet warriors' needs.

Forming Our Perspective on Veteran Employment

Overview

Currently, the Bureau of Labor and Statistics (BLS) reports an unemployment rate for veterans of 3.8 percent[1]. Although this historically low level of unemployment reflects a positive trend across the general veteran population, based on data from our WWP Annual Survey and feedback from our warriors, WWP recognizes that employment, education, and debt remain areas of need for warriors registered with our organization. As discussed in more detail below, our internal data indicates that warriors who are wounded, ill, or injured have additional challenges when faced with the military to civilian transition, and especially in entering into a productive long-term civilian job.

While our population is resilient and able to adapt to life's challenges, sustainable employment is widely regarded as the key to a healthy military to civilian transition. VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program (VR&E) helps disabled veterans in that process. Although there are challenges with VA's VR&E Program, there are also areas where there has been much improvement. This testimony will cover our own demographic, the history behind the VR&E Program, current information technology (IT) improvements, and our recommendations for improvement.

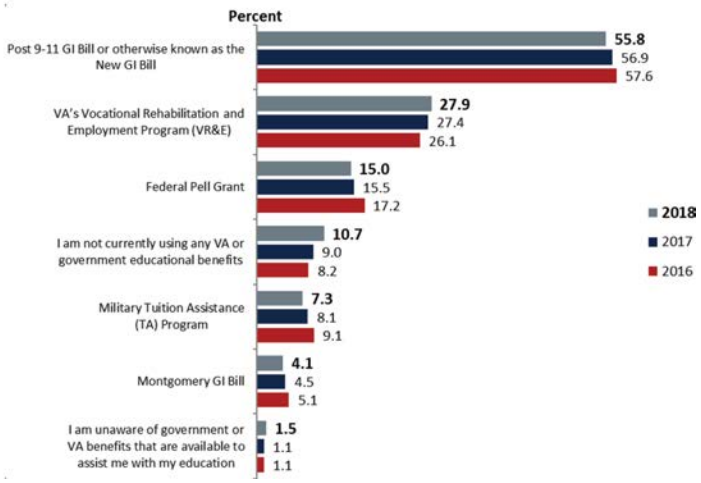
Wounded Warrior Project's Employment and Education Demographic

Each year, WWP administers the largest survey of warriors who served on or after September 11, 2001. In 2018, over 33,000 respondents completed the survey, which asks a range of questions to help us better understand the population we serve and adapt our programs, partnerships, and advocacy to meet their needs.

In Focus: Alumni Education

Among 2018 WWP Survey respondents, 55.8 percent indicated they were currently enrolled in an institution of higher education and utilizing the Post-9/11 GI Bill, whereas 27.9 percent of our warriors surveyed indicated they were enrolled in VR&E. Our population has a higher than average usage of the VR&E program compared to the general veteran population. With approximately 900,000 student veterans currently using the Chapter 33 Post-9/11 GI Bill and 125,513 veterans enrolled in Chapter 31 VR&E benefits, around 14 percent of the veteran population is utilizing the VR&E benefit. We attribute this increase of usage in our population to our mission to assist the wounded, ill, and injured veterans of this generation. Additionally, the WWP survey indicates that the warriors we serve are utilizing the VR&E benefits at higher rates year over year, whereas the usage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill is decreasing each year (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. VA or Government Education Benefits Used by School Enrollees



As warriors pursue higher education for employment, some are incurring student loan debt. We know through our WWP Alumni Warrior Survey that finical difficulties can have a negative impact on veterans. The biggest trend that we have seen

[1] https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/vet.pdf

in student loan debt in our constituency is those with $30,000 or more in student loan debt increasing steadily since 2016. In 2016, 28.2 percent owed more than $30,000. In 2018, 32.5 percent owed more than $30,000 (see Figure 2)[2]. Specifically, regarding WWP alumni that are currently enrolled in VR&E, we see that over 33.6 percent have student loan debt of over $30,000 (see Figure 3).

Figure 2. Warrior Student Loan Debt

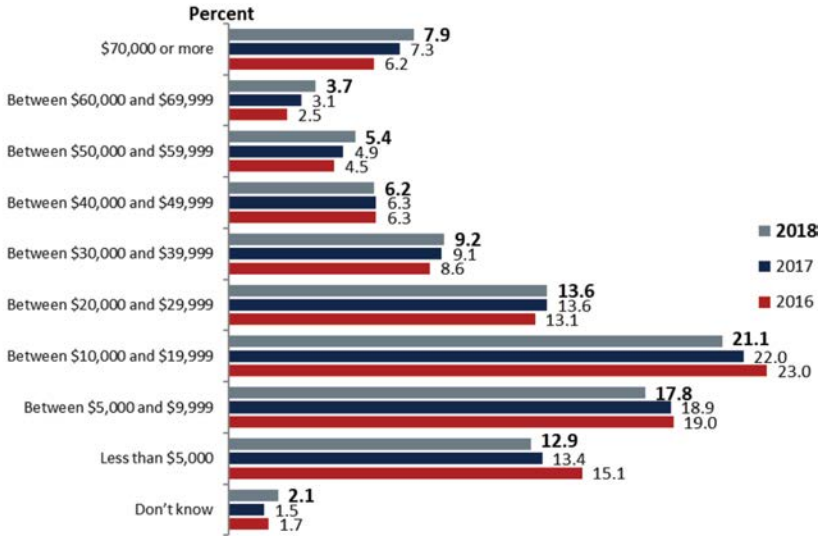


Figure 2. Warrior Student Loan Debt While Utilizing Chapter 31

Warriors in VR&E with unpaid student loans	
Total Unpaid Student Loans	**Percentage**
Less than $5,000	9.7%
Between $5,000 and $9,999	18.3%
Between $10,000 and $19,999	23.1%
Between $20,000 and $29,999	15.3%
Between $30,000 and $39,999	11.3%
Between $40,000 and $49,999	6.3%
Between $50,000 and $59,999	6.6%
Between $60,000 and $69,999	4.0%
$70,000 or more	5.4%
TOTAL	100%

In Focus: Alumni in the Work Force

Among all warriors that participated in the survey, 55.1 percent are employed in paid work. Paid work can be considered either full-time or part-time. Eleven percent of our warriors indicated that they were unemployed. This is a decrease from 2016, where 13.2 percent indicated they were unemployed. While we recognized that our

[2] https://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/media/183005/2018-wwp-annual-warrior-survey.pdf

unemployment rate is higher than the Bureau of Labor and Statistics findings (BLS), this can be attributed to all respondents in our survey report having a disability status whereas the BLS information includes all veterans. Sixty-two percent of our alumni report having a VA disability rating of 80 percent or more, which can lead to a higher rate of unemployment.

Notably, unemployed warriors indicated the primary reason for not entering into the workforce was:

- 61.7% - Medical/health conditions (or treatment) prevent them from working
- 15.6% - Retired
- 13.8% - In school or in a training program
- 3.9% - Would have liked to work but have become discouraged about finding work and did not look for work in the past 4 weeks
- 3.0% - Family responsibilities
- 2.0% - Other (non-service-connected disability) medical/health condition (or treatment) prevents them from working

In our survey, we asked the 61.7 percent of warriors that indicated "medical or health conditions prevented them from working" to list factors that made it more difficult for them to obtain employment. The top findings included [3]:

- 33.6 percent indicated that it was due to "mental health issues" and
- 30.1 percent indicated that it was "difficult for me to be around others."

As VR&E expands its role in ensuring veterans are employed for the long term, those with potential mental health concerns might benefit from additional counseling in civilian workforce assimilation. Recommending veterans with mental health challenges work with a specialist that focuses on integration into the civilian work environment can be as beneficial as physical rehabilitation is for those with physical wounds. Below are comments made by our warriors regarding problems adapting to the civilian workplace:

- I only feel comfortable in combat. I do not feel comfortable in civilian life or trust it.
- I think the most challenging thing is where in the Military you have a certain routine that everyone is used to and then you get out here in the civilian world, and there's a whole Whirlwind of changes and getting acclimated as well as trying to find common ground with people you'll be exposed to on a daily basis.
- Dealing with civilians & finding work that is flexible enough to permit me to go to my appointments.
- Regarding difficulty in employment, it is not that no one will hire me because of my injury or disability, but because they later will force me out of the job for that reason because I need to go to the hospital or appointments so much for my disabilities.

Meeting Needs Through WWP Programs

Wounded Warrior Project's Warriors to Work Program assists veterans searching for jobs after military service, with a particular emphasis on providing assistance at transition. This program provides a range of services designed to meet veterans wherever they are in their job-seeking process. We assist warriors with resume building, job placement, interview skills, and skill translators. WWP recognizes that meaningful employment is critical to a successful transition from military to civilian life. Service-connected disabilities often make finding meaningful and long-lasting employment difficult. As WWP programming is designed to fill gaps in government services and raise awareness for federal, state, and local resources that exist, Warriors to Work staff members regularly recommend the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program to those whose disability affects their long-term employment.

Overview of Chapter 31, Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program:

Under Chapter 31 of Title 38, the VR&E program is intended to be an entitlement program that provides employment opportunities through job training and other employment-related services, to include education, job search services, and small business start-up funds. The goal of the VR&E program is to evaluate and improve the veteran's ability to achieve a vocational goal; provide services to qualify for suitable employment; enable a veteran to achieve maximum independence in daily living; and, enable the veteran to become employed in a suitable occupation and to main-

[3] https://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/media/183005/2018-wwp-annual-warrior-survey.pdf

tain suitable employment as outlined in 38 U.S.C. § 3104; 38 C.F.R. § 21.70(a). Development of an Individualized Written Rehabilitation Plan (IWRP) is required for each veteran eligible for rehabilitation services under Chapter 31, 38 C.F.R. § 21.80(a). An IWRP is prepared in each case when a veteran will pursue a vocational rehabilitation program or an extended evaluation program. The plan will be jointly developed by VA staff and the veteran, and the terms and conditions of the IWRP must be approved and agreed to by the Counseling Psychologist (CP) or the vocational rehabilitation specialist (VRC), and the veteran. In FY18, 165,943 veterans received evaluation and counseling services with a total of $1,431,562,000 spent on the VR&E program [4].

While the VR&E program is primarily an employment service, in the case where a disabled veteran is unable to work, the VR&E program provides independent living (IL) assistance, which is aimed at making sure that eligible veterans are able to live independently to their maximum capacity. For up to 28 months, individuals in the IL assistance program may be entitled to assistive technology; specialized medical, health, and rehabilitation services. Enrollment into the IL assistance program is capped at 2,700 participants per year.

To be eligible for assistance under VR&E, a veteran must have at least a 10 percent VA disability rating and found to have a "serious employment handicap," or at least a 20 percent VA disability rating and found to have an "employment handicap." Once qualified for services through VR&E, a veteran may be placed into one of five different tracks:

- Employment through Long-Term Services - The Employment through Long-Term Services is for veterans who require university-level education or vocation training to become employable. This track is currently the most frequently used track.
- Self-employment ≥- While not utilized as much as some of the other programs, the Self-employment program assists veterans in starting their own company with start-up funds, equipment, training, and business plan review.
- Rapid Access to Employment - Considered the quickest way to employment, the Rapid Access to Employment track relies on a network of vetted employers to place veterans directly into the job field.
- Reemployment - If a disabled veteran wishes to and is capable of reemployment in a job they had before their disability occurred, but current working conditions are not suitable for their disabilities, the Reemployment track can assist with employer disability training and adaptive equipment for the veteran.
- Independent Living - If the disabled veteran is considered unemployable, the Independent Living track can assist by offering the veteran 28 months of assistive technology and training on independent living skills.

While VR&E benefits are typically limited to 48 months, these tracks can be extended. Additionally, veterans may change tracks if their disability worsens, which is critical for veterans with medical issues that evolve over time.

It is the responsibility of VA to ensure it has made reasonable efforts to inform and assure the veteran's understanding of the services and assistance that may be provided under Chapter 31 to help them maintain satisfactory cooperation and conduct, and to cope with problems directly related to the rehabilitation process, especially counseling services.

History of Chapter 31, Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program:

In 1918, P.L. 65–178, the Vocational Rehabilitation Act provided retraining assistance for disabled veterans who served in the U.S. military and naval forces and was administered by the Federal Board for Vocational Education. In 1921, administration of the program was transferred to the newly created Veterans' Bureau. In 1943, P.L. 78–16 was enacted which broadened eligibility and authorized up to four years of educational assistance to restore employability to disabled veterans. While in the intervening years the scope of the program has been modified and expanded, in 1999, the name was officially changed to Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment in order to emphasize the program's focus on employment rather than education. The goal was to inform veterans that education was a tool available to those in the VR&E program, but employment was the ultimate goal. In 2003, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, via the 110 recommendations made by a task force and the Government Accountability Office (GAO), formed the separate employment tracks and indicated that better measures and monitoring with a focus on employment could improve the performance of the program.

[4] https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RL34627.pdf

The VR&E program is administered by the Under Secretary of Benefits at VA. There are two primary individuals working the day to day operations of the VR&E program. The VR&E Service Director determines policy and priorities and the Deputy Under Secretary of Field Operations manages and allocates employees to 56 regional benefits offices. VR&E uses a decentralized approach that has over 350 local offices and 1,335 staff, including Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (VRC), Employment Coordinators, and support staff.

In practice, VR&E staff workload is dictated by the number of veterans applying for VR&E benefits, the number of those veterans who enter into the program, the number of new cases versus the completion of current ongoing cases, the change in military strength overall, and the influx in military service-related injuries and illnesses. These are the areas that VR&E leadership should track to judge potential influxes or lapses in case workload.

Current IT and Case Management System Updates

Recently, WWP spoke with the office overseeing the VR&E program at the VA headquarters regarding its new Case Management System, which is replacing its Corporate Windows Remote Shell System (WINRS). We were very pleased with the current progress of the IT transformations, and the innovate approach this office is taking to address known shortfalls in the VR&E program.

VA will implement seven separate modernization initiatives starting in the first quarter (Q1) of FY19 with scheduled completion in the fourth quarter (Q4) of FY21. Currently, the VR&E program has implemented the first four of the seven initiatives. These seven initiatives are:

- Initiate eFolder (Q1 FY19) -Will ensure that VR&E begins using an eFolder to electronically store documents that were formerly completed using paper.
- Scan Surplus Cases (Q1 FY19) -Will scan closed cases into the eFolder, so there is a digital archive of all cases.
- E–Invoicing (Q1 FY19) - Will create a standardized invoice processing system which will drastically reduce the administrative burden currently placed on counselors and administrative staff.
- Virtual Assistant (Q2 FY19) - A virtual assistant program that will assist in scheduling appointments via text messages, emails, and other platforms to ensure counselors can better utilize their time.
- Centralized Mail (Q4 FY19) - Will eliminate the need for manual processing in receiving mail and streamline the intake of paper.
- Active Folder Scan (Q4 FY19) - Will allow paper reports to be uploaded into the eFolder to helpfully transition to a paperless operation.
- Case Management Solution Service (Q4 FY19) - Will utilize all former changes to re-engineer processes to serve veterans better.

Of these seven initiatives, WWP is particularly excited for the Virtual Assistant and E–Invoicing provisions. The Virtual Assistant is an artificial intelligence platform which will enable VA to communicate with the veteran through text messaging or e-mail. One aspect that WWP finds innovative is the ability for veterans to confirm their appointment via text or alter the appointment through the Virtual Assistant.

WWP spoke with Vocational Counselors around the country. They indicated that the E–Invoicing initiative would drastically reduce administrative functions and allow counselors more face-to-face time with veterans. Additionally, warriors going through the VR&E program's Employment through Long-Term Services suggest that delayed payments to educational institutions have an extremely negative impact on their performance. These delays are disruptive to the veteran's educational and employment goals. It is our hope that the new E–Invoicing provision will cut down on instances where veterans are denied college supplies, books, and even barred from classes, due to delayed invoice payments or errors on behalf of the VA.

Additionally, VR&E will be introducing a Tele-counseling ability using VA's Video Connect Software. WWP is pleased that VA has incorporated this tool as well. We find that at times, it can be difficult for veterans to drive to a local office due to time constraints or location. Using Tele-counseling will drastically reduce "no-shows" and allow counselors to have more interaction with the veteran. VA has also incorporated Dragon Speech Recognition software for counselors to dictate their notes in a timelier manner. VR&E's approach in using Software as a Service (SaaS) such as the Dragon Speech Recognition and Virtual Assistant is an innovative approach that we recommend VA adopt more widely. SaaS software can many times be more cost effective, easy to update, and easy to change as technology evolves and becomes more complicated. We applaud VR&E for being one of the first VA offices

to utilize commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) products to more efficiently achieve positive results for veterans.

WWP is optimistic for the current IT and Case Management Software updates that VA has and will continue to implement in the upcoming fiscal year. We find it encouraging that many of the provisions outlined in this section were recommendations made by VSO testimony in previous years.

VR&E 20 Year Study

In 2008, Congress enacted P.L. 110–389, the Veterans Benefits Improvement Act of 2008. This legislation required VA to conduct a 20-year longitudinal study of veterans who entered into one of the five VR&E tracks. Three cohorts from FY10, FY12, and FY14 were chosen to be a part of the study. The intent is to determine long-term employment outcomes after a veteran exits the VR&E program.

In a GAO report from 2014 titled, VA Vocation Rehabilitation and Employment - Further Performance and Workload Management Improvements are Needed (GAO–14–61), GAO advises VA to increase their management and data collection on this 20-year study.

These annual reports help organizations like WWP identify areas where we might need to focus information for our constituents. In 2016, VA released information showing that 81.2 percent, or 111,270 individuals, participating in Chapter 31 education benefits are OEF, OIF or OND veterans[5]. This information helps WWP understand where potential lapses in care might be and how we can assist.

Recommendations for Improvement

Raise Awareness and Improve Clarity/Intentions

The process to enroll in Chapter 31 educational benefits appears significantly different between locations where the program is offered. While one veteran is entitled to participate in a graduate degree program, another veteran will be authorized for an associate degree program even though both veterans have similar backgrounds and goals. This is primarily due to an ambiguous and seemingly subjective process for the establishment of the entitlement. WWP recommends that the VA and the VSO community educate veterans on the intent of the program before applying for VR&E benefits. This benefit is an employment benefit that utilizes education as one of its many tools for employment. For the Employment through Long-Term Services to be considered the correct track, the veteran's disability must be interfering with their ability to obtain employment and their education benefits already depleted. This program is not an additional education program to assist the veteran in obtaining a masters or higher education degree debt free. However, if a counselor deems that a master or higher education degree is in the best interest of the veteran due to their disability, then they can authorize the veteran to enroll in classes.

Additionally, there is anecdotal evidence of applicants being told to a) apply to less expensive online programs; b) denied approval with little explanation, and c) refused utilizing of the program for a graduate level degree even if it is in the best interest of the veteran. We have also heard from VRCs that inappropriate staffing is a continual issue, especially in large population locations, and counselors are continually pressured by leadership to lower the average cost of each veteran using the program. A common complaint we have heard from veterans is the inability to switch to another counselor if they feel their current counselor is not assisting with reaching their employment goals. These are all issues that we recommend VA address with internal policy changes.

Increase Subsistence Allowance

WWP requests that VA align its subsistence allowance to those outlined in Chapter 33 of Title 38. While a subsistence allowance is necessary for a veteran to complete the Chapter 31 employment goals, a common complaint is the amount does not translate equally among rural areas versus city living. The VR&E subsistence allowance of approximately $900 per month does not have the same financial assistance power in Los Angeles, CA as it does in Charleston, SC. We have heard of reports where veterans discontinue their participation in the program due to financial difficulties. In the 2014 GAO report, 18 percent of veterans who withdrew from their employment services cited "financial difficulties." Another 27 percent indicated "family obligations," which could be considered financial difficulties as well depending on the situation[6].

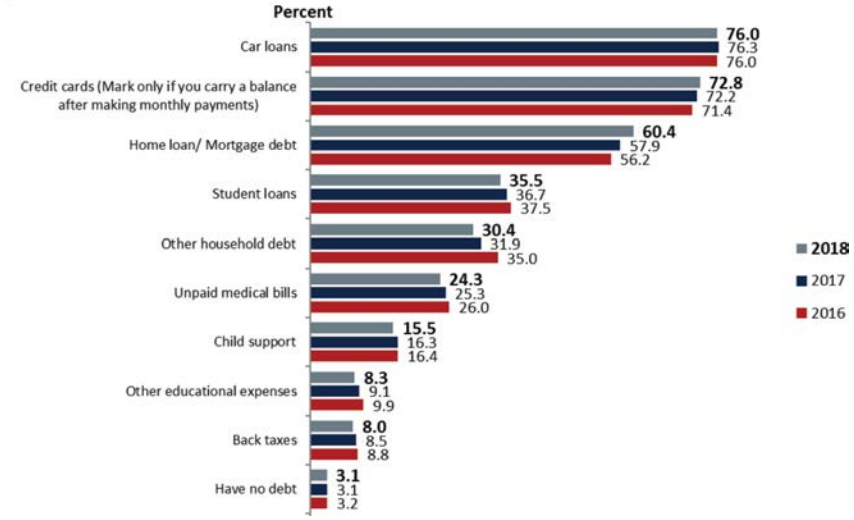
---

[5] Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Longitudinal Study (PL 110–389 Sec. 334), 2017.

[6] https://www.gao.gov/assets/670/660160.pdf

According to our 2018 Warrior Survey, the top three most common forms of debt are car loans, credit cards, and mortgage debt (see Figure 3). A veteran experiencing financial hardship regarding their car or home loan will affect their ability to attend VR&E courses or counseling. Because "financial difficulties" are common with those enrolled in VR&E, we recommend a pilot program to assist veterans deemed to be at risk of financial hardships to receive financial literacy classes through VR&E. If a large population of veterans is discontinuing their participation due to financial hardships, a program to address financial issues before they become catastrophic could increase the veteran completion rate.

Figure 3: Current Forms of Debt



Counseling and Financial Assistance

As outlined by the comments our warriors made regarding the workforce (see "In Focus: Alumni in the Work Force"), warriors often feel challenges in transitioning from the military to the civilian workforce. They can feel left out or unwelcomed, and at times, isolated. Because of this, WWP recommends a pilot program offering mental health counseling to those with invisible wounds and general classes on adapting to the civilian workplace for all veterans receiving VR&E counseling. WWP also recommends that VRCs emphasize the need to attend medical appointments while participating in the program because sufficient health maintenance can become more challenging upon entering the workforce.

Additionally, due to the high amount of student loan debt for those with disabilities rated at 100 percent, WWP recommends that VR&E counselors include Department of Education Student Loan discharge information for any veteran who is 100 percent VA disabled.

Change the Program Name

WWP recommends VA change the name of Chapter 31, Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program. We recommend VA remove the word "Rehabilitation" and replace it with something more appropriate for 21st-century life. At the present time, the word "rehabilitation" or "rehab" is associated with programs for those seeking assistance for substance abuse. In 1918, when the VR&E program was launched, "rehabilitation" was defined as:

- Noun 1. Rehabilitation - the restoration of someone to a useful place in society -the treatment of physical disabilities by massage and electrotherapy and exercises [7]

Today, that same term is defined by the same dictionary as:

[7] https://www.webster-dictionary.org/definition/Rehabilitation

- Noun 1. Rehabilitation - the action, process, or result of rehabilitating or of being rehabilitated: such as:

-the process of restoring a person to a drug- or alcohol-free state

-process of restoring someone (such as a criminal) to a useful and constructive place in society [8]

While the word "rehabilitation" was appropriate in 1918, it is no longer widely used in the same fashion today. To alleviate confusion among those not familiar with the program, including prospective employers, Congress should consider a new name that more appropriately conveys the nature of the VR&E program to civilians in 2019 and beyond.

Improve Staffing Model

Current statute requires VA to maintain a VR&E Counselor to veteran ratio that does not exceed 125 veterans to one full-time employee [9]. While VA has hired additional counselors, and the improved IT and Case Management System are promising, we recommend that Congress and VA reevaluate what an appropriate ratio is. It might be that with more complex cases going through VR&E 125 is too many or that with the new Case Management System and other IT changes, Vocational Counselors are able to serve more veterans at one time and not become overburdened.

Improve the Self-Employment Track

The VR&E Self Employment track is for veterans who have limited access to traditional employment and might need a flexible work environment to accommodate disabilities. Assistance may include business plan development, training in operations of small business, and most importantly, access to start-up funds for a small business. Access to capital is considered one of the biggest barriers of entry for starting a small business. While we agree that the Self Employment track is not suitable for everyone, we do feel that it is currently underutilized due to the complexity and risk in establishing a successful employment outcome for someone wanting to start their own business.

Wounded Warrior Project recommends a closer look into this track to find ways to work with other federal organizations, such as the Veterans Employment and Training Service office at the Department of Labor and the Small Business Administration to promote this track to more veterans while ensuring proper spending of public dollars.

Improve Employment Placement

The ultimate goal of the VR&E program is to provide long-lasting employment. There is a direct correlation between job satisfaction and the likelihood of resigning from a job within 12 months. According to a national survey of American workers, 40 percent of employees who reported an expectation to leave their job within the first 12 months cited that they were "less than satisfied" with their employment [10]. We also know through our survey that veterans are gravitating towards federal, state, and local government jobs [11]. In 2015, 32 percent of all new government hires were veterans [12]. While veterans are applying for these open positions in record numbers, we have heard from VRCs that it can be difficult finding federal employment for participants. This can be due to the complexity of applying and obtaining employment in the federal government. WWP recommends a pilot program to streamline veterans who are in the VR&E program into open positions at VA. By working with VA's internal Human Resource Office, the VR&E program can direct veterans into healthcare related fields with the goal of filling critically needed VA positions. Currently, there are 45,239 open vacancies at the VA [13] and around 125,000 participants in the VR&E program. This seems to be a natural fit for those looking for employment.

Closing Remarks

While Chapter 31, Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program have some exciting changes in the form of how it administers the benefit, there remain concerns and areas for increased investment and focus. In FY18 there were:

---

[8] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rehabilitation

[9] P.L. 114–223

[10] http://www.hrcouncil.ca/documents/LMI—satisfaction—retention.pdf

[11] https://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/media/183005/2018-wwp-annual-warrior-survey.pdf

[12] https://federalnewsnetwork.com/hiring-retention/2016/11/veterans-made-32-percent-new-government-hires-2015/

[13] https://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=5104

- 27,194 new enrollees,
- 66,772 participants who carried over from FY17,
- 597 were added into the Independent living program,
- 10,735 were in a non-education employment program,
- 794 were in an education program,
- 603 gained employment,
- 3,268 were considered employable but did not have a job, and
- 15,550 were discontinued

Most concerning is the 15,550 veterans that were discontinued from the program and the 3,268 veterans that were considered employable but had not received a job yet. While the new case management system will likely assist the Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors with bandwidth issues, we hope that VA does not increase case workload, but instead, focus on lowering these two data points and addressing more deeply the needs of veterans seeking work. While there will always be veterans who do not perform at the standard needed to remain in a program, this amount seems unusually high. It is our assumption that some of the veterans that were discontinued were due to issues that could have been resolved if the counselor had the time to understand the individual frustrations or limitations of the veteran.

Wounded Warrior Project thanks the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, its distinguished Members, and all who have contributed to the policy discussions surrounding this issue. We share a sacred obligation to serve our nation's veterans, and WWP appreciates the Subcommittee's effort to identify and address challenges and successes we see within VAs Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program.

Prepared Statement of Jeremy M. Villanueva

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting DAV (Disabled American Veterans) to testify at this oversight hearing of the Subcommittee of Economic Opportunity regarding the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

DAV is a congressionally chartered national veterans' service organization of more than one million wartime veterans, all of whom were injured or made ill while serving on behalf of this nation. To fulfill our service mission to America's injured and ill veterans and their families, DAV directly employs a corps of more than 260 National Service Officers (NSOs), all of whom are themselves wartime service-connected disabled veterans, at every VA Regional Office (RO) as well as other VA facilities throughout the nation. Together with our chapter, department, transition and county veteran service officers, DAV has over 4,000 accredited representatives on the front lines providing free claims and appeals services - including for VR&E programs - to our nation's veterans, their families and survivors.

We represent over one million veterans or survivors, making DAV the largest veterans' service organization (VSO) providing claims assistance. This testimony reflects the collective experience and expertise of our thousands of dedicated and highly trained service officers who provide free claims and appeals assistance to hundreds of thousands of veterans and survivors each year.

Our mission begins with the principle that this nation's first duty to veterans is the rehabilitation and welfare of its wartime disabled. This principle envisions vocational rehabilitation and/or education to assist disabled veterans to prepare for and obtain gainful employment so that the full array of talents and abilities of disabled veterans are used productively.

In fact, all of DAV's National Service Officers have received or are currently receiving services through VR&E as part of the DAV National Service Officer Apprentice Program through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with VA's VR&E program.

I testify before you today, not just as an advocate for disabled veterans but also representing a successful outcome of VR&E. As a veteran of the United States Marine Corps I had utilized my educational benefits under the Post-9/11 GI Bill and attained a bachelor's degree at California State University of Bakersfield in 2013. However, due in part to my disabilities, I could not obtain gainful employment that utilized my college education. When I was hired by DAV in 2014, I was enrolled in VR&E, provided a vocational plan that took into consideration my service-connected conditions and assisted in my first 16 months of employment as a National Service Officer (NSO) where I personally assisted veterans with their VA claims, to include applying for VR&E benefits. I completed the DAV NSO Training Program

in October 2015 and was promoted to DAV's office at the Board of Veterans' Appeals in July 2016 where I represented veterans before Veterans Law Judges to help secure their earned benefits before being appointed to my current position on DAV's legislative staff. I am an example of how VR&E can help a veteran find the path to economic success that is best suited for that individual.

VA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AND EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM

The VR&E program, also known as the Chapter 31 program, assists veterans and service members with service-connected disabilities and an employment barrier to prepare for, obtain, and maintain suitable employment. Veterans with at least a 20 percent disability evaluation or a 10 percent evaluation with a serious employment handicap meet the eligibility criteria. VR&E provides comprehensive services to include vocational assessment, rehabilitation planning, and employment services. For veterans with service-connected disabilities so severe that they cannot immediately consider work, the VR&E program offers services to improve their ability to live as independently as possible within their families and communities.

VR&E administers these benefits through a decentralized service-delivery network comprised of nearly 360 offices throughout 56 regions, each anchored by an RO. As of the end of fiscal year (FY) 2018, VR&E was comprised of a workforce of 1,645 staff, including Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (VRC), Employment Coordinators, support staff, and managers.

VR&E's workload is driven by a number of factors, including: (1) the number of veterans applying for rehabilitation benefits and services; (2) the number of veterans who enter into the development and implementation of a rehabilitation plan; (3) the associated growth of disability claims consistent with the ongoing reduction of the claims backlog; (4) changes to total volume of military separations due to military end-strength policy; and (5) frequency/severity of service-related injuries/illnesses. Once a veteran or service member applies and is determined eligible for services based on service-connected disability rating and honorable discharge, the veteran meets with a VRC to complete a comprehensive vocational assessment. The VRC will then make an entitlement determination based on the counselor's interview that determines whether the veteran's disabilities impair their ability to find and hold a job. If the veteran or service member is not entitled to VR&E services, the counselor will assist with any necessary referrals for other services such as referrals to state vocational rehabilitation programs, local employment agencies, or other local or state training programs.

The cycle of an active VR&E case may extend up to and beyond six years. This is necessary to provide adequate training for veterans so that they can obtain employment that accommodates their disabilities and provides a career foundation that is appropriate to their education, abilities, and ambition. In addition, counselor follow-up after securing an occupation is crucial to ensuring the veteran is employed and will stay employed.

When service-disabled veterans seek to reintegrate, they should be knowledgeable about not only what educational and occupational benefits are available but which one is right for them. While the GI Bill focuses on education and training, VR&E counselors work with veterans to develop an individualized development plan following one of five tracks:

- Reemployment - for veterans who served in active military service or in the national guard or reserves, and are now returning to employers for whom they worked, prior to going on active duty;
- Rapid Access to Employment - for individuals ready to seek employment after separation and have the necessary skills to be competitive;
- Self-Employment - for individuals who have job skills to start a business;
- Employment through long-term services - provides an extended period of training and rehabilitation services to ensure that veterans acquire the skills necessary to obtain and maintain suitable employment;
- Independent Living (IL) - for individuals unable to work, provides support to achieve maximum independence in daily living and, whenever possible, increase the individual's ability to participate in an extended evaluation to explore the potential to return to work

While many veterans will utilize the GI Bill and thrive, there are many who would be better served by one of VR&E's five tracks. The importance of the veteran knowing which option they would be better suited for cannot be understated.

In 2008, Congress passed the Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act, which required VA to conduct a 20-year longitudinal study of veterans who applied for and entered into a plan of services in the VR&E program in fiscal years (FY) 2010, 2012, and 2014. These three cohorts are being followed annually for 20 years each. Survey

data collection started in 2012 for the first two cohorts and in 2014 for the last cohort. The primary focus of the VR&E Longitudinal Study is on the long-term employment and standard of living outcomes for VR&E participants after they exit the program.

The preliminary results from these studies are showing that VR&E is an effective program that enhances the economic outlook for the veterans who utilize it. In the VR&E Longitudinal Study Annual Report 2018 for FY 2017, it reported that approximately 90 percent of veterans who have achieved rehabilitation from an employment plan were employed in the past year for all three cohorts and that amongst Cohort 1 and Cohort 2, the rate of homeownership was higher than the general population of the United States (70 percent and 67 percent versus 64.2 percent, respectively). Combine this with reported incomes that are at least $18,000 dollars higher than for those who discontinued the program, VR&E is proving to be a valuable resource to America's disabled veterans.

But there are some areas to improve upon. Rural and economically disadvantaged veterans continue to have barriers to access to benefits. Despite data showing how beneficial VR&E can be, participation rates in the programs are down even as the target population is growing. We are concerned that VA's hiring of new counselors to strengthen the program and increase services to disabled veterans, is being negated by utilizing these counselors to do administrative tasks. In addition, VR&E is suffering from a lack of resources and funding.

DECREASE IN PARTICIPATION

VA's Budget Request for FY 2020 states that the VR&E program will meet and sustain the congressionally mandated goal of 1:125 counselor-to client ratio. However, the latest data in the VA budget document also shows that from 2016 to 2018, the number of VR&E participants fell from 173,606 to 164,355—more than a five percent decrease. During that same period, VR&E's caseload also dropped from 137,097 to 125,513—an 8.4 percent decline. It would appear that VR&E is able to meet the 1:125 goal by serving fewer veterans. VA's Principal Under Secretary for Benefits acknowledged the decrease before this Subcommittee during a hearing in April 2019 and indicated VBA could not explain why this occurred. We are concerned that the lack of counselors over the years has finally caught up to VA and participation in VR&E has dropped because of this. We question if VR&E has instituted any new policies or practices that have deterred disabled veterans from seeking these services and what action is VA taking to increase awareness of the availability and benefits of VR&E services.

We are troubled that this decrease comes at a time when the latest VR&E Longitudinal Study finds that the number of participants had been increasing with each cohort. Cohort II (FY 2012) is 43 percent larger than Cohort I (2010) and Cohort III (2014) is 95 percent larger than Cohort I. Also, the study notes that the all three cohorts consist of younger veterans who are more likely to have served during the Gulf War II era, with two-thirds of these veterans having a service-connected disability rating of 60 percent or higher.

The decrease in participation is particularly concerning when viewed with the current statistics released by the Bureau of Labor and Statistics. In March 2019, the Bureau released its report that showed of Gulf War II era veterans, 41 percent had a service connected disability rating and, of that 41 percent, 50 percent had a rating of 60 percent or higher. And participation of that era of veteran is growing. Beginning in 2016, Gulf War Era veterans became the largest veteran cohort. Additionally, across all generations, the rate of service-disabled veterans who are unemployed has remained statistically higher than veterans with no disability, 5.2 percent compared to 3.5 percent.

COUNSELOR–TO–VETERAN RATIO

The transition of service-disabled veterans to meaningful employment is strengthened by VA's ability to provide vocational rehabilitation and employment services in a timely and effective manner, but the demands and expectations being placed on the VR&E service are exceeding the organization's current capacity. DAV's Resolution No. 191 supports strengthening the VR&E service to meet the demands of service-disabled veterans by providing increased staffing and funding, a timelier and effective transition into the workforce, and placement follow-up with employers for at least six months.

Public Law 114–223 calls for VR&E not to exceed 125 veterans to one full-time employee (FTE). In the FY 2020 VA budget request, an additional 70 VRCs were requested to provide comprehensive individualized services in geographical areas where the ratio exceeds 125:1. In 2018, VR&E's rolling average counselor caseload ratio was 131:5.

While the request for 70 additional FTE is encouraging, the total FTE for that time period only rose by four. According to the Summary of the Budget Request, the total FTE increase between 2018 and 2020 is 18 FTE and only four between 2019 and 2020. We question where the additional 70 counselors will come from and if VA is adding counselors at the expense of other staff? Additionally, VA noted in its assessment of the recent tele-conferencing pilot program that VRCs who participated in the program "had to assume duties that were generally completed by Program Support Staff-the scheduling of appointments, monitoring of attendance, sending 10-day letters, and completing closure activities for those applicants who did not show for their scheduled appointments." Increasing counselors but losing other essential staff undercuts the benefit of achieving the 125:1 ratio.

TELE–COUNSELING

In early 2017, the VA initiated a pilot program in the St. Petersburg RO with 3 VRCs that used secure video teleconferencing technology to enable them to remotely counsel veterans. VR&E's tele-counseling application was developed through a partnership with VHA's VA telehealth services. The purpose of the pilot program was to give veterans who have busy schedules, live in rural locations, and/or face transportation challenges easier access to VR&E benefits and resources. This initial pilot included 196 VR&E applicants and VA reported the following findings:

- 82 of the 196, or 42 percent of the potential participants, indicated an interest in taking part in the pilot;
- Of the 58 percent who were not interested in participating, the most commonly stated reason was lack of access to a computer or internet; the next most cited reason was the preference to have an in-person meeting with their VRC;
- Of those who participated in a tele-counseling session, the average travel time saved was four hours. Of note, seven individuals that were not determined to be entitled would have had to drive between four and six hours roundtrip just to be told they were not entitled to VR&E benefits.

This past March, VR&E expanded tele-counseling services nationwide to over 1,000 counselors. We are encouraged that VR&E has taken steps to reduce travel requirements to both veterans and VRCs alike, facilitate better case management, and help veterans to obtain their benefits more efficiently. It should be noted though, that this program should remain an option for veterans and not standard protocol. The pilot program showed that there were significant numbers of veterans who preferred face-to-face meetings with their counselors. In addition, VA needs to address the "digital divide" issues so that rural and low income veterans who do not have access to reliable internet or computers are not excluded from participation. A collaborative effort between Microsoft Corp and VA to extend broadband internet connectivity to underserved rural veteran communities is one example of how the VA can address this issue. Extension of broadband services is essential to the success of not only tele-counseling but also tele-health.

VETERANS ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY ADMINISTRATION

In order to further strengthen VA's education, economic opportunities and transition programs, to include VR&E, DAV supports the creation of a fourth administration within the VA, which would be comprised of VBA programs currently under the purview of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). The new Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration (VEOTA) would include critical programs such as VR&E, the GI Bill and the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) for transitioning service members.

At present, VA is comprised of three administrations: VBA, VHA, and the National Cemetery Administration. VBA includes not only compensation and pension programs for veterans, but also education programs, VR&E, home loan, veteran-owned business programs, and the broadly defined transition program, which is shared with DOD and the Departments of Labor (DOL) and Homeland Security. All of these programs are currently overseen by the OEO, which is to be led by a Deputy Under Secretary. However, that position has been left vacant for years and it does not appear that the vacancy will be filled any time soon.

Currently, the OEO programs inside VBA must compete for resources and focus with the Compensation, Pension and Insurance programs, of which compensation is by far the largest and tends to dominate the attention of VBA leadership and personnel. Because of the scale and scope of the claims and appeals processing reforms in recent years, it has been challenging for VA's economic opportunity (EO) programs to compete for adequate funding, specialized resources, and other prioritization. For example, while VBA has boosted resources to support the modernization and streamlining of the claims and appeals process for the past several

years, other important programs such as VR&E have actually seen a stagnation of resources and oversight. Between 2014 and 2018, VR&E participation increased by approximately 17 percent while the funding rose less than two percent.

For VR&E to fully reach its potential it needs a leadership structure that's success rests solely on the success of the economic opportunity programs. The creation of this fourth administration would provide greater accountability to Congress when problems such as low participation rates and the misallocation of resources come to light. In addition, by having an Under Secretary who is held accountable for the actions and success of VR&E and other EO programs, greater oversight can be accomplished and results improved.

Mr. Chairman, VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program has shown time and time again that it is a useful resource for service-disabled veterans who are looking to utilize their given skills and talents to improve their quality of life. We look forward to working with this Subcommittee to make sure that VR&E continues to ease and expand access to this important resource for America's disabled veterans. This concludes my testimony on behalf of DAV. I would be happy to answer any questions you or other members of the Subcommittee may have.

Prepared Statement of Steven Henry

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and distinguished members of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) appreciates this opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee about the effectiveness of the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA's) Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment programs (VR&E).

Vocational rehabilitation has been an integral part of this nation's commitment to veterans with disabilities since Congress first established a system of veterans' benefits upon entry of the United States into World War I in 1917. VR&E, which is sometimes referred to as the Chapter 31 program, provides services to eligible service members and veterans with service-connected disabilities to help them prepare for, obtain, and maintain suitable employment or achieve independence in daily living. Unfortunately, because VR&E is such a small program, it receives a lot less attention and much less funding than other programs in the Veterans Benefits Administration like disability compensation.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2017, VR&E had 132,218 veterans who participated in a rehabilitation plan,[1] including those who began a plan in that year or previous years. About three-quarters (76 percent) of the veterans participating in VR&E have a serious employment handicap, which must result in substantial part from a service-connected disability. These veterans, when participating in the program, may receive additional supportive services, which include extensions of entitlement and adaptive equipment.

PVA believes that the effectiveness of VA's VR&E programs could be greatly improved through a number of changes that include greater outreach to veterans to raise awareness about the benefit; continued collaboration with outside agencies and programs; and increased follow up time with participants.

Lack of Communication and Outreach to Veterans

PVA has found that VR&E usage throughout our membership is rather low. We do not believe that this is due to a lack of interest, but rather a lack of understanding of how the program works. One PVA member recently noted that he learned about the program only after he had returned to the workforce following his injury. Another was vaguely aware of the program but thought he was no longer eligible even though he actually retained eligibility. These are common occurrences, and it's possible that the program is being overshadowed by the Forever GI Bill which is widely advertised through a multitude of venues.

We often hear how great and beneficial VR&E is; however, there is a clear lack of communication and outreach to all disabled veterans. In FY 2018, roughly 4.75 million veterans had service-connected disabilities,[2] but less than 3 percent of them utilized VR&E services. If you were to ask the average veteran about VA benefits, most could explain key elements of the disability compensation program, but very few know basic facts about VR&E.

VA must do a better job explaining the advantages of participating in VR&E to veterans with service-connected disabilities. Unfortunately, many younger disabled

[1] https://www.benefits.va.gov/VOCREHAB/docs/2017LongStdy.
[2] https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/QuickFacts/SCD—quickfacts—FY2018.PDF.

veterans see VR&E as strictly an employment program and feel they are better suited for the Forever GI Bill. VA should conduct a national outreach effort, perhaps in collaboration with veterans service organizations, regarding VR&E services.

Ensure Access to Services

A veteran's eligibility period for receiving services from VR&E is for a 12-year period beginning on either: (1) the date of separation from military service, or (2) the date the veteran receives a VA disability rating. To receive services, a veteran must need vocational rehabilitation to overcome employment barriers due to a service-connected disability. A veteran's entitlement to participate in VR&E services is 48 months.

For veterans who have incurred a catastrophic disability, the 12-year delimiting date may not be sufficient to allow them to meet their vocational rehabilitation goals. Furthermore, many of these veterans have disabilities that may continue to evolve and worsen over time, which may cause them to need additional assistance. Veterans with service-connected disabilities must have access to the vocational rehabilitation services that allow them to continue to work throughout their lives.

Although a VR&E counselor may waive the 12-year limit for veterans with serious employment barriers, veterans living with the wounds, injuries, and illnesses associated with military service should have certainty that if they need assistance in staying in or returning to the workforce in the future that this program will be there to assist them.

Limiting eligibility harms veterans, particularly those with catastrophic disabilities by failing to foster the conditions necessary to allow them to be a part of their communities and contributing members to our nation's economy. Ensuring continued access to VR&E services could help veterans with disabilities fulfill their full potential and we greatly appreciate this Subcommittee's recent approval of H.R. 444, the Reduce Unemployment for Veterans of All Ages Act of 2019, which seeks to lift the arbitrary 12-year time limit.

Continue Collaboration with Public and Private Partners

As a result of the barriers to employment faced by our members, PVA launched its own vocational rehabilitation and employment program in 2007, Paving Access for Veterans Employment (PAVE). With offices in Philadelphia, Atlanta, Long Beach, Richmond, San Antonio, Minneapolis, and San Diego PAVE serves all veterans nationwide using a hybrid, integrated approach to assist veterans and transitioning service members who face significant barriers to employment, as well as their spouses and caregivers.

PAVE offices were originally co-located in VA medical facilities, increasing the collaboration between VR&E and PAVE personnel and ensuring a stronger safety net for veterans with disabilities. Due to space constraints at VA medical facilities, this is no longer the case, and only the Richmond and San Antonio PAVE staff work side-by-side with VR&E. PVA has seen a decrease in referrals from VR&E since when we had to move staff to other locations.

PAVE provides clients with one-on-one career counseling and assistance. The program's services are available to any veterans with disabilities, including those whose disabilities are not related to their military service. PAVE counselors offer proactive, rapid engagement to ensure newly injured or ill veterans quickly learn about the services and supports available to help them return to work. Importantly, the program is a partner for life to ensure clients' continuing success. All services are provided at no charge.

Continuing to foster new partnerships to ensure that veterans with disabilities, particularly those who have catastrophic disabilities, can be successful in returning to work is needed to stretch VR&E's existing resources. For example, PAVE counselors have noted that they can more quickly begin providing vocational assistance because there are fewer procedural hurdles to clear for eligibility. Another important aspect of these partnerships is the ability of private partners to serve veterans who are ineligible for VR&E services, along with the caregivers and family members of all veterans who may need these services. Thus, these partnerships allow more veterans to receive high-quality assistance.

VA's VR&E program must also continue to foster relationships with other government programs that have responsibilities to help veterans with disabilities obtain and retain employment. For example, the Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) administers programs that play a key role in assisting veterans with disabilities in obtaining employment. We are pleased that VR&E now reports that 100 percent of VR&E clients are referred to the state workforce system and the assistance available through federally-funded Disabled Vet-

erans' Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists. We urge continued and increased collaboration and an evaluation of the success of these referrals for VR&E clients.

Collaborating with public and private partners is an important way to ensure that veterans with disabilities will be able to receive the services and supports needed to allow them to build successful employment outcomes. VR&E must continue to do community outreach to find experienced, credible partners to meet gaps that will result in more veterans with disabilities being placed in competitive, integrated employment sooner. Sometimes, as was the case when PAVE moved out of VA facilities, out of sight can mean out of mind.

Increase Follow Up Time

VR&E counselors typically follow veterans for 60 days once they are placed in a job. After that time, VA will close the veteran's case, and the placement will be deemed a success. We are concerned, however, that 60 days is not enough time to determine whether or not a veteran who has a catastrophic disability has successfully adjusted to working as a person with a disability.

Most people find it at least somewhat challenging to settle into a new job. For someone who has acquired a disability, there are additional challenges that must be met including those related to needed accommodations, evolving medical needs and appointments, and other disability-related matters that can unfold over a period of time. Furthermore, employee probationary periods may be longer than 60 days, in some federal positions probationary periods can last up to a year or even longer.

PVA believes that, at the very least, VR&E should study whether or not the current tracking standard of 60 days is sufficient follow up time. For employees with probationary periods over 60 days, longer follow up time may allow for problems that could lead to dismissal to be addressed, resulting in the veteran remaining employed. Regardless of the length of a probationary period, if any, it makes sense to increase the follow-up time to ensure that the veteran has the supports, if needed, to ensure a successful transition to the workforce. That's why our PAVE counselors conduct ongoing follow up for veterans placed through their program.

Long-term support may be needed to help a veteran with a catastrophic disability to not only successfully transition back to the workforce but also to remain in the workforce. If a veteran is not successful in the workplace, they may suffer setbacks to include a belief that work is not possible, even when the problem was lack of support. Not all jobs turn out to be the right fit, but no veteran should feel that their only option is to leave the workforce when the proper supports and assistance would allow him or her to be successful. America cannot afford to waste the talent of these veterans who have much to offer to our society.

Enhance Independent Living

Despite best efforts, veterans who have significant disabilities may be unable to enter the labor market. In 1980, Congress passed a pilot program designed to assist these veterans by providing them with needed services and resources to increase their independence and ability to participate in their families and communities. Through the Independent Living program, VA can guide these veterans in the development of goals and provide the information, referrals, and continuing case management needed for success in achieving them. A number of creative alternatives to employment preparation can be recommended, purchased, or approved by a veteran's counselor to enhance a veteran's quality of life.

VA's Independent Living (IL) program was initially limited to 500 veterans. Over time, the program proved to be a critical option for improving the rehabilitation experiences of catastrophically disabled veterans. Congress raised that number a couple of times, and currently, 2,700 veterans are permitted to begin the IL program each year. This limit can be waived to accommodate veterans who have been adversely affected by a natural or other disasters, as determined by the VA.[3]

PVA believes the cap should be raised so VA can accept any veteran who could benefit from the program. Also, VR&E counselors must be well-versed in the Independent Living program to ensure that those who are eligible and who would benefit most from participation are given the opportunity to do so. Once a veteran is in the program, counselors must also closely track referrals for VA service and benefits to ensure that those referrals are addressed. Otherwise, the program will fail the veterans it serves, and their independence will be compromised.

In sum, without the proper services and supports, veterans with catastrophic disabilities are in danger of falling out of the workforce permanently. Such a loss means decreased financial security and social opportunities. VA's VR&E program

[3] See 38 U.S.C. 3120(e)(2). This change was made by Section 701(c) of P.L. 112–154, Honoring America's Veterans and Caring for Camp Lejeune Families Act of 2012.

provides critical access to needed services and supports for veterans with service-connected disabilities. An investment in VR&E is an investment in helping veterans with disabilities return to work and ensuring their long-term rehabilitation and success.

PVA thanks the Subcommittee for the opportunity to express our views and we welcome any follow-up questions you may have.

Prepared Statement of Tanya Ang

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program. Veterans Education Success works to advance higher education success for veterans, service members, and military families, and to protect the integrity and promise of the GI Bill and other federal education programs. We strongly believe holistic support and access to high-quality post-secondary education and training for workforce development provides opportunities for those who have served our country to successfully transition from military service into the civilian workforce and continue to be strong contributors to our nation's economic wellbeing. We believe that VR&E is one of VA's most effective program to accomplish such.

VR&E is designed to provide support for veterans and servicemembers with service connected disabilities the opportunity to receive the necessary support to "prepare for, obtain, and maintain suitable employment."[1] The benefits provided by this program are significant; yet, despite its important role, it often flies under the radar by policymakers. It is appropriate and necessary for the Committee to continue to give VR&E the attention it deserves.

Over the last ten years as I have worked with military-affiliated students, and the institutions of higher learning that support them, I've heard consistent feedback about the program and veterans' concerns in three areas I would like to bring to the Committee's attention: (1) Technology, (2) Staffing, and (3) Inconsistency of counseling and direction provided by Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors.

These 3 areas of concern also arose during the May 2018 Congressional hearing about the program. Witnesses testimony included the insufficient client-to-counselor ratio, the proposed cut of approximately $59 million dollars to the program for the FY 2019 VA Budget, and the lack of training and consistency for counselors.

Since that time, we want to acknowledge that VA has been proactive in addressing a number of these concerns, including increasing the amount of funding requested in the FY 2020 budget proposal. Most of that requested increase is aimed at hiring 70 more counselors to meet the statutory mandate of no more than 125 clients per counselor and for the continued roll out of a modernized case management system that automates invoice payment processing in the early part of FY 2020. They have also employed a tele-counseling pilot program and other technology to create ease of access.[2] VES supports VA's requested funding for FY 2020 and urges Congress to approve it.

While we are hopeful for what appears to be a positive path forward for the program, we believe there are still areas that deserve attention and need to be addressed.

The Need for a Modernized Case Management System

The last time the case management system for VR&E was updated was over two decades ago, in 1997. Complaints from both students and school administrators have revolved around the challenges School Certifying Officials (SCOs) have faced with, what one school administrator referred to as, the black hole of certification. This is not surprising as it is still a paper-based file system.

Students have gone up to six months without receiving payments, causing undue financial hardship. When SCOs contact VA Regional Offices for updates, they are left with little information and much frustration as they work to find ways to provide answers and support for their student veterans struggling to stay in school.

---

[1] U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Longitudinal Study (PL 110–389 Sec. 334): Annual Report 2018 for FY 2017. https://www.benefits.va.gov/VOCREHAB/docs/2017LongStdy.pdf

[2] U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. FY 2020 President's Budget Request. March 11, 2019. https://www.va.gov/budget/docs/summary/fy2020VAbudgetvolumeIIIbenefitsBurialProgramsAndDeptmentalAdministration.pdf

In 2015, the VR&E office was authorized to work with the VA Office of Information & Technology (VA OI&T) to modernize their case management system. In spring of 2018, after approximately $12 million was spent on trying to update the system, the program was scrapped.[3] Since then, VA has been working to effectively update the system and, according to VA officials, plans to roll it out this fall.

Given the recent challenges VA OI&T has experienced with its last attempt to modernize this system and the rollout of sections 107 and 501 of the Harry W. Colmery Act, we urge careful Congressional oversight. We remain cautiously optimistic about previewing this system in the coming months.

Insufficient and Inadequate Veteran Resource Counselors

Veteran Resource Counselors are crucial to the success or failure of the program, yet many barriers currently exist to prohibit them from achieving the level of success they could. With the modernization of the case management system, we believe some of these barriers should, in theory, be removed since it will automate some of the administrative burden. That said, we still remain concerned about the following issues:

Client-to-Counselor Ratio - We applaud VBA's concerted effort to reduce the number of clients per counselor but question the current legislative mandate of 125 clients to one counselor. The program is set-up to offer individualized plans specific to the needs and challenges of each client. This type of support is necessary to help the veteran successfully accomplish his or her goals, yet the time it takes to provide such support and follow-up can be labor intensive.[4] We believe it would be beneficial to further explore if the current client to counselor ratio is effective. We encourage the Committee to consider decreasing the Congressionally mandated ratio to something more along the lines of 85 clients for each counselor.

Challenges with Conflicts of Interest - We are also concerned about the recent news of James King, a VR&E Counselor who pleaded guilty in October 2018 to bribery, fraud and obstruction for demanding and receiving bribes from three for-profit schools in exchange for directing disabled veterans to those schools, in a kickback scheme.[5] In addition to lying about the types of training his clients were receiving, Mr. King threatened one veteran that his benefits would lapse if he did not attend one of the three schools Mr. King was conspiring with. Additionally, he forced a student to pursue training in a vocational program he was not physically able to perform due to his service-connected disability. This individual had communicated his desire to pursue training to become a baker, yet that path was not financially beneficial for Mr. King.

While this example is clearly egregious in nature, it highlights the importance of ensuring counselors are not in positions where there is a clear conflict of interest. We would encourage Congress to ensure stronger conflict of interest provisions and oversight.

Concerns about the Power of Counselors and Inadequate Requirements of Quality - The story of Mr. King also highlights the amount of power and influence counselors have in approving or disapproving a veteran's educational path. In the past three years, I have worked with at least three students who were admitted into top tier universities. They were also accepted into low-quality schools that did not produce the same outcomes, but because that institution accepted one credit of PE from the student's Joint Services Transcript, the counselor forced the individual to choose the lower quality school because it would be more cost effective.

While the VR&E program is focused primarily on vocational training and is not an education benefit, the student was going to receive higher quality training that would lead to more opportunities within the career field they were pursuing. It took months of petitioning to get each of those students into the higher quality programs. These are not isolated cases. Many examples exist of disabled students steered away from Ivy League and top-notch colleges - which would significantly enhance their career trajectory - and instead towards low-quality schools that are much less respected on the job market.

---

[3] House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity Hearing, "A Review of VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxQ8Wuktal4&feature=youtu.be

[4] The American Council on Education. ACE;s 2015 Servicemember and Veteran Academic Advising Summit Report. 2015. https://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Documents/2015–Veterans-Programs-Summit-Report.pdf

[5] The U.S. Department of Justice. Department of Veterans Affairs Official Pleads Guilty to Bribery, Fraud, and Obstruction in $2 Million Scheme Involving Program for Disabled Military Veterans. October 26, 2018. https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/department-veterans-affairs-official-pleads-guilty-bribery-fraud-and-obstruction-2-million

Not all counselors will railroad students in this manner, but they all possess the power to do so if they choose. This highlights the need for ensuring consistency in guidelines and expectations for counselors, in particular requiring counselors to consider the quality and future earnings trajectory of a college, as there are wide differences among colleges. We would encourage the Committee to require quality considerations in VR&E college selections, using, for example, GI Bill Comparison Tool metrics. We also believe students should have a more prominent voice in the selection of the institution or program they choose to pursue.

Veterans have also complained about inconsistency in what they are allowed, or not allowed, to pursue related to education. One student might only be allowed to pursue a two-year degree while their peer is approved to pursue a doctorate degree. While this program is indeed a rehabilitation program to allow veterans the opportunity to get necessary training for their specified career path, veterans should have the opportunity to use their full 48 months to pursue training that will allow them to increase their ability to be a substantive contributor to the American economy.

Proper Training and Consistent Expectations - Additionally, counselors should continue to receive ongoing training. In his May 2018 testimony, former Director Jack Kammerer referred to a Competency Based Training System the Department was planning to roll out during the 2019 fiscal year.[6] The concept sounds promising, but we would encourage VA to ensure the trainings incorporate comprehensive information for all five tracks in the VR&E program and require annual training to stay abreast of current issues.

Jack of All Trades, Master of None - In a Government Accountability Office report, veterans cited challenges with their counselor's inability to help them translate their military service into federal civilian employment and frustration that a counselor did not adequately describe the physical challenges of the job given the veteran's physical disabilities.[7] Veterans using the VR&E program are supported by their Counselors to develop individualized plans following one of five tracks: Reemployment, Rapid access to employment, Self-employment, Employment through long-term services, and Independent Living. The counselor is expected to be a subject matter expert on each of these tracks. That is an impossible standard to meet.

By analogy, if a veteran visits a VA Health clinic for a specific health issue, they visit a specialist. An orthopedic surgeon is not going to be able to effectively help a patient who is having respiratory issues. Why not apply the same standard to veterans who need vocational rehabilitation?

In some of the regional VR&E offices, counselors are assigned subject matter experts for one area. In other offices, there is concern about maintaining continuity of counselors and the impact it can have on persistence and successful completion of a program.[8] While there is no clear-cut answer on how to address this issue since what works in some offices may not work in others, we agree with the GAO report recommendations on conducting field research to identify and publish promising practices for client support for each of the field offices. VA also agreed with this recommendation. We believe it would be helpful for this Committee to learn if this was completed and what the outcomes were. Subject matter expertise is worth the Committee's consideration.

Additional Recommendations

As Congressman Arrington mentioned in his opening statements for the May 2018 hearing, VR&E should be the "crown jewel" of programs, yet it unfortunately falls short in ways the Post-9/11 GI Bill does not.[9] When the Forever GI Bill was passed in 2017, Congress removed the 15-year delimiting date and included restoration of entitlement to students whose schools closed. We agree with our colleagues at Veterans of Foreign War, Paralyzed Veterans of America, and Disabled American Veterans who have called for the removal of the 12-year delimiting date.[10] Those using

---

[6] Statement of Jack Kammerer, Director, Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment, Veterans Benefits Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs Before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity. May, 18, 2018. https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR10/20180517/108251/HHRG–115–VR10–Wstate-KammererJ–20180517.pdf

[7] U.S. Government Accountability Office. Report to Congressional Committees, "VA Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment: Further Performance and Workload Management improvements Are Needed." 2014. https://www.gao.gov/assets/670/660160.pdf

[8] Ibid

[9] House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity Hearing, "A Review of VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxQ8Wuktal4&feature=youtu.be

[10] The Independent Budget Veterans Agenda for the 116th Congress: Policy Recommendations for Congress and the Administration. "Enhance Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Services." http://www.independentbudget.org/pdf/TIB–EAE3–Enhance-Vocational-Rehabilitation-and-Employment-Services.pdf

VR&E should also have the same restoration of entitlement their peers receiving the Post-9/11 GI Bill enjoy. They pursue programs of study based on the guidance and direction of their counselors and only have one chance to do so. It is unacceptable that severely injured veterans do not get their benefits reinstated when a school closes, leaving them with wasted benefits, nothing to show for it, and no ability to fulfill the mission of the program - vocational rehabilitation.

Create Rate Parity - Currently this program has two different subsistence rates. One is at the rate of the Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit and one is at the rate of the Montgomery GI Bill benefit. Veterans in the same program of study could have vastly different benefits. This is confusing since, unlike the Post-9/11 GI Bill and the Montgomery GI Bill, VR&E is one benefit program. It also creates a larger administrative burden and challenges for VA as they navigate what subsistence rate the veteran is eligible for. This can be challenging for a veteran and discourages them from taking advantage of a program that could have positive lifelong impacts. Moving the subsistence rate to one rate reduces bureaucracy, eliminates confusion, and creates better parity for service members and veterans with service-connected disabilities.

Transparency - Finally, VR&E does not have the same transparency as the Post-9/11 GI Bill. No information is available on the Comparison Tool related to where veterans pursue post-secondary education using VR&E. Additionally, it is challenging to find current and pertinent information other than in annual reports. Having access to this information would be helpful for outside organizations who are also supporting those using this program, as well as for disabled veterans seeking information on the college outcomes of their peers.

I appreciate the Committee's continued commitment to this program and look forward to answering any further questions you might have.