VES VETERANS EDUCATION SUCCESS

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING ON MOVING BEYOND PATCHWORK SYSTEMS: THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION SERVICES IT

SUBMITTED TO THE

SUBCOMMITTEES ON TECHNOLOGY MODERNIZATION AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

September 16, 2020

Chairwoman Lee and Chairman Levin, Ranking Members Banks and Bilirakis, and Members of the Subcommittees:

Veterans Education Success is a non-profit organization with a mission 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.

In addition to research, providing free case work to students having trouble with the GI Bill or impacted by predatory schools, and elevating the voices of students to share with policy makers both their positive and negative experiences in higher education, we are focused on addressing ways to increase the continued academic success of military-connected students in their pursuit of their academic goals.

We thank the Subcommittees for their attention to the important issue of modernizing the patchwork information technology (IT) systems at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Ensuring the needed IT infrastructure is in place to support student veterans and their families is critical now more than ever given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

VA's IT Budget Must be Adequately Funded and the IT Infrastructure Be Promptly Modernized

The GI Bill system is antiquated and desperately needs to be modernized. Much of the GI Bill tracking is done manually for tasks that could easily be automated. This causes a number of problems:

- First, it wastes an enormous amount of VA staff time for tasks that are easily automated.

- Second, the wasted time means VA is unable to perform other, more important tasks. For example, VA staff and State approving agencies (SAAs) are currently unable to spend sufficient time on quality oversight of GI Bill schools, because payment audits (checking social security numbers) in compliance surveys of schools are currently taking up too much time, as we documented in our 2019 research report.[1] Checking social security numbers by hand is not a good use of VA and SAA time and could easily be automated.

- Third, the lack of a modern IT system for the GI Bill means that VA is forced to send notices by postal mail. Many veterans do not receive important GI Bill notices (including debt collection notices) because they have moved and their mail does not forward.

- Fourth, the lack of a modern IT system causes delays in benefits to veterans, especially when there are statutory changes. For example, in 2018, veterans experienced delays and errors in receiving their GI Bill benefits because VA's legacy IT systems were not equipped to handle the changes Congress made in the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act. At a recent hearing, Undersecretary of Benefits Dr. Paul R. Lawrence expressed his frustration at the current state of IT infrastructure and the need to address it: "Our legacy systems are old …. We need to replace them at some point … Our systems right now are inflexible and limit us tremendously and they require more resources to be fixed."[2] We agree with Dr. Lawrence.

- Fifth, the lack of a modern IT system for GI Bill leaves VA hamstrung in attempts to analyze and track data, such as student outcomes. For example, VA cannot easily search through GI Bill students for certain characteristics or outcomes.

We urge the Subcommittees to please work with the Veterans Benefits Administration to identify the resources needed to create a modern IT system for the GI Bill and then ensure the money is both allocated and appropriated. Students are put in harm's way by continuing to utilize an outdated system; appropriating the necessary funds to upgrade the system is vital.

Conclusion

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[1] Veterans Education Success, *VA and States Should Act on Early Warning Signs When Risks to GI Bill Beneficiaries and Taxpayers Emerge at Participating Schools* (2019), available at: https://vetsedsuccess.org/va-and-saas-should-act-on-early-warning-signs-when-risks-to-gi-bill-beneficiaries-and-taxpayers-emerge-at-participating-schools/.

[2] VA Under Secretary for Benefits Dr. Paul R. Lawrence, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Economic Subcommittee Hearing on Forever GI Bill Implantation Efforts, at 48:00 – 48:30, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tzc7r1OkfZQ.

We thank the Subcommittees for discussing the importance of modernizing the educational IT system. Veterans Education Success sincerely appreciates the opportunity to express our views before the Subcommittees today. Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, Veterans Education Success has received no federal grants in Fiscal Year 2020 nor in the previous two years.