



**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD
SUBMITTED TO THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
118TH CONGRESS, SECOND SESSION**

December 11, 2024

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and Members of the Subcommittee:

We thank you for the opportunity to share our perspective on the Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) program. Veterans Education Success works on a bipartisan basis 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 provide direct assistance to hundreds of student veterans each year. Through this work, we have heard from veterans about their experiences with VR&E.

We strongly believe in holistic support and access to high-quality post-secondary education and training for workforce development in order to provide opportunities for those who have served our country. These are critical elements of many successful transitions from military service into the civilian workforce, and continue to be strong contributors to our nation's economic well-being. Our organization views VR&E as one of VA's most important programs for veterans.

The program is designed to provide veterans and service members who have service-connected disabilities the opportunity to receive the support necessary to "prepare for, obtain, and maintain suitable employment."¹ We are grateful to the Subcommittee for continuing to give VR&E the appropriate and necessary attention it deserves.

Following our previous statements to the Subcommittee in 2019 and 2022, we have continued to receive complaints from veterans about VR&E.^{2,3} The recent complaints

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 Veterans Education Success, "VES Written Statement on Evaluating the Effectiveness of VA Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Programs Before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity," June 4, 2019. https://vetsedsuccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/VES_SFR_VRE_06032019-1.pdf

³ Veterans Education Success, "Our Statement for the Record on the Topic of 'Veteran Readiness and Employment: Is VA Succeeding?'" September 15, 2022. <https://vetsedsuccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/VES-SFR-VRE-Hearing-HVAC-EO-September-15-2022.pdf>

reviewed in advance of this hearing continue to tell a story that the process for VR&E benefits is often too complicated and stressful, and veterans get tired of fighting for what they deserve. All too often, there are counselors who prove to be unresponsive, or even antagonistic, to a veteran's interests.

Highlighted below are specific areas of concern raised by veterans who have contacted us recently, followed by recommendations of potential solutions to the challenges veterans face.

Veterans feel counselors and the program steer them away from high-quality programs or push them to enroll in low-quality programs.

One veteran who contacted us had been notified by her counselor that she had only a few days to enroll in a school or risk being removed from the VR&E program. Unfortunately, the veteran was not able to get her transcript from a college she had attended years earlier, due to an outstanding debt. On such short notice and without her transcript, she could not find a reputable school to enroll in and was forced to enroll in a school she says provided misleading financial aid information and took out loans in her name which she did not authorize. *VR&E counselors should never impose unexpected and artificial deadlines on veterans, especially deadlines that force the veterans to make hasty decisions.*

In another example, one Marine Corps veteran planned to attend a prestigious arts institution, after gaining experience, connections, and recommendations in the industry related to the field of study. The VR&E counselor, however, refused to approve the school for the veteran, stating that the school would be a "high-cost school" and that there are other schools with similar degree options that would be more "economical." The veteran believed the VR&E counselor ignored several practical reasons that the chosen school was actually a better fit than other schools, including that the school's prestige would provide greater opportunities for employment in a competitive field.

Another veteran, who served 12 years on active duty before transitioning out of the service and who is rated as 100% disabled, was accepted into a highly regarded business school at an Ivy League institution. The veteran said his new VR&E counselor immediately denied approval for the school, stating that it is a "high-cost school" and the credential can be earned "at a local university with reasonable costs." According to the veteran, the VR&E counselor was "callous" and "uninterested, and disregarded the specifics of his situation and discounted the benefits of the school."

Particularly frustrating to the veterans in these last two examples is that the school approval process appeared arbitrary. In both instances, the veterans knew that other VR&E counselors had approved veterans to attend these exact same institutions.

Veterans complain that applying for and using VR&E benefits is too difficult; counselors have denied their admission to the VR&E program, denied their education program, or refused to cover certain programmatic costs without a reasonable explanation, causing tremendous stress.

One veteran contacted us when the VR&E counselor refused to cover the costs of the materials needed for coursework, including a laptop. The veteran says the counselor provided a confusing explanation, ultimately indicating the regional office did not have the funds to cover the cost.

Other veterans have complained that they have difficulty using VR&E for graduate or professional degrees. For instance, one veteran who contacted us explained that his VR&E counselor would not approve his doctoral program. Instead of approving a doctoral program, the VR&E counselor approved the veteran for a different, Master's level program that would only qualify the veteran for work incompatible with the veteran's disability. The counselor did not address the veteran's plea that the program would not provide suitable employment when making the decision.

Additionally, veterans have complained to us that counselors have improperly determined that VR&E benefits may not be utilized to complete graduate or professional educational programs. The counselors have also determined that completing the graduate or professional program is unnecessary for a vocation, sometimes even after the veteran has commenced the course of study.

It appears some counselors may not have the training to understand how different vocations can be impacted by a disability, including for veterans who already possess a post-secondary credential.

VR&E counselors are often difficult to reach and do not provide timely information and responses to veterans.

Veterans reaching out to our team about VR&E are often very discouraged and do not feel like counselors are assisting them. Veterans have shared stories that indicate their counselors do not have the competence or time needed to help them, and, to the veterans, the counselors appear as if they are actively working to disqualify them from benefits. A veteran is sometimes assigned multiple successive counselors, compounding the problem of the veteran receiving contradictory and confusing directions and decisions in regard to their VR&E benefits. Some veterans also have shared their concern that the counselor may retaliate against the veteran.

Veterans generally have problems getting responses from their counselors. One veteran who contacted us was considering withdrawing from the program altogether because he had not been able to get a response from his counselor. The veteran explained that he "had many problems with my new VR&E counselor ... and have been unable to reach him after my university changed my degree's course requirements a year ago. I am considering withdrawing from the VR&E program to finish my degree under Ch. 33, if possible."

A medically retired Army veteran of 21 years contacted us for help when he had been trying to start using the VR&E program for more than 6 months. He had tried to get assistance during his medical board and retirement process and for several months afterwards, but did not receive a response.

Another veteran who was frustrated with his experience of the VR&E program wrote, “I have become pessimistic, emotionally stressed, and low confidence [sic] that an approval will be returned.”

Based on the issues addressed above, Veterans Education Success makes the following recommendations for the Subcommittee’s consideration:

- **Staff Ratio.** As the veterans’ stories above demonstrate, too many VR&E counselors are overburdened and unresponsive. We renew our call for Congress to further decrease the number of clients per counselor from 125 clients to around 85 clients per counselor. While VA has worked to reduce the number of clients per counselor, we believe it would be beneficial to further decrease the Congressionally mandated ratio to a maximum of 85 clients per counselor. The current threshold of 125 is too high for counselors to address the individual needs of student veterans adequately, and veterans often complain about the lack of responsiveness of their counselors.
- **Counseling Consistency.** As raised in our prior statements to the Subcommittee, we continue to hear from veterans admitted into top-tier universities who were forced by counselors to enroll in low-quality schools, notwithstanding that the low-quality school would not produce the career outcomes that a degree from a top school would bring the veteran. Some veterans even reported previously that VR&E counselors required them to forgo Ivy League colleges (where they had been admitted) in favor of low-quality, online for-profit colleges that had been successfully sued by the federal government for fraud. As discussed above, too many veterans continue to report subpar counseling.

Consequently, we continue to recommend increased training for VR&E counselors that includes comprehensive information for all five tracks in the VR&E program, consistent expectations, and requirements for quality to help improve veteran outcomes and overall customer experience. In particular, counselors should be trained to avoid recommending schools that have federal caution flags or law enforcement actions. Counselors should also be empowered to approve requests for obtaining additional education, including graduate degrees, when it is needed for veterans to obtain their vocational goals. We believe additional training and more explicit guidance for counselors could help improve the program delivery and experience for student veterans.

- **System Modernization.** Finally, we believe it is imperative for VA to continue to focus on improving and modernizing the current case management system so that payments to students are not delayed, given the dire financial situations many veterans are currently facing. As program participation rates rise, we feel these suggestions should be considered for future legislation to provide veterans with the world-class experience they deserve. Along these lines, we commend the recent e-VA Document Repository and Automation Initiative, which we believe significantly reduces an otherwise time- and effort-intensive process for VR&E counselors. This digitization and automation will allow student veterans to provide critical information in a greatly more efficient and effective manner.
- **Housing Allowance Parity.** We urge Congress to establish a Monthly Housing Allowance (MHA) for VR&E students at rates similar to the Post-9/11 GI Bill to keep pace with the rising cost of living.⁴

We thank the Subcommittee for your attention to this important issue and your consideration of our statement. We will also continue to provide feedback we hear from the veterans with whom we work. The VR&E program is one of the most important tools in helping veterans transition into long-term careers to support themselves and their families. We look forward to continuing to collaborate with your staff and the Department of Veterans Affairs to improve this crucial program.

Conclusion

Veterans Education Success sincerely appreciates the opportunity to express our views before this Subcommittee. As the higher education industry continues to evolve in these very dynamic times, we emphasize the importance of maintaining high standards of quality. Student veterans, taxpayers, and Congress must expect the best outcomes for veterans' hard-earned VA benefits. We look forward to the discussion and review of these proposals, and we are grateful for the continued opportunities to collaborate on these topics.

⁴ Veterans Education Success, "Statement for the Record, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Economic Opportunity Subcommittee Hearing, *Getting Veterans to Work after COVID-19*," July 21, 2020. <https://vetsedsuccess.org/our-sfr-for-july-21-hvac-economic-opportunity-subcommittee-hearing-getting-veterans-to-work-after-covid-19/>

Information Required by Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, Veterans Education Success has not received any federal grants in Fiscal Year 2024, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.