

EXCLUSIVE: How predatory trade schools drained \$300 million from the GI Bill and cheated veterans

The institutions defrauded Veterans Affairs while cheating thousands out of career training, with some offering training on how to grow grass and make fake rocks, a Post investigation found.

By Craig Whitlock and Andrew Ba Tran

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Illustration by Isabel Seliger for The Washington Post.

For-profit trade schools that educate military veterans under the GI Bill have bilked the federal government out of more than \$300 million, often by charging eye-popping sums for basic classes that last only a few days or weeks, according to a Washington Post investigation.

In New Hampshire, an “organic lawn care institute” taught veterans how to grow grass in a course that took, at most, five days. The school typically billed the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) \$14,900 per student, more than triple what it charged civilians not covered by the GI Bill. The federal government paid the school more than \$2 million before it came under investigation and closed, records obtained under the Freedom of Information Act show.

Another GI Bill trade school based in New Hampshire charged \$18,500 in tuition to teach veterans how to make fake rocks out of concrete, federal documents show. That course lasted eight days. The school owner, a convicted tax evader, exploited veterans as free labor on building projects, according to public records and interviews. Before officials forced it to shut down, VA paid the school \$17.8 million over nearly seven years.

In Texas, a destitute high school dropout opened a “boot camp” that trained novices to become heating and air-conditioning technicians in just six weeks. Tuition and fees ran around \$20,000. Within three years, the school had reaped \$72 million from the GI Bill to enroll more than 3,500 veterans. The owner bought a Lamborghini, a Ferrari and a Bentley — and spent almost \$200,000 at strip clubs — before being arrested and convicted of fraud, court records show.

At the owner’s trial, several veterans described the boot camp as a slapdash operation that duped them with hollow promises of a good-paying career.

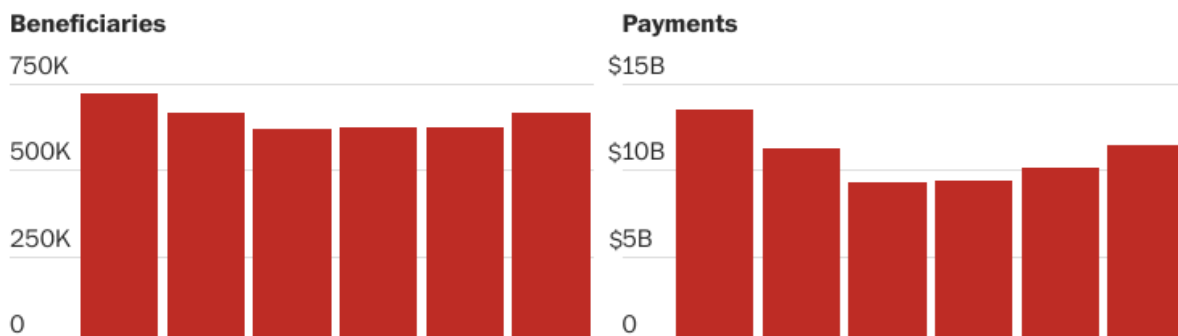
“I feel bamboozled,” testified Ryan DiFranco, a Marine veteran who said the school’s deficient training caused him to lose three jobs. “It’s a nightmare that lives in the back of my mind all the time.”

The GI Bill ranks as one of the most popular benefit programs in U.S. history. Since its inception near the end of World War II, more than 25 million veterans have relied on it to pay for college, job training and other benefits. Some economists credit the GI Bill with helping to expand America’s middle class. Military recruiters tout it as a critical incentive for volunteers to enlist in the armed forces.

Last year, taxpayers spent more than \$11 billion to educate about 666,000 people under the GI Bill. Over the past two decades, Congress has passed laws to make the GI Bill more generous and flexible. Veterans no longer must use their benefits within a few years of leaving the armed forces, and they can transfer benefits to their spouses or children.

But lax government oversight has given rise to chicanery and fraud, allowing predatory for-profit trade schools to cheat thousands of veterans out of training intended to help them build new careers, The Post found.

GI Bill participation and payments



GI Bill participation and payments. Payments adjusted to 2025 dollars; benefits may include tuition, fees, housing and supplies. Source: Veterans Benefits Administration Annual Benefits Report.

Part of the problem is a loophole that allows trade schools to charge exorbitant prices for brief, often rudimentary classes.

The GI Bill generally covers up to 36 months of expenses for students enrolled in college or vocational school. VA now pays a maximum of \$30,908 annually in tuition at most private and for-profit schools. Lower limits apply to public institutions.

While the annual cap is designed to prevent price gouging, VA has no standard for minimum course length. Because schools bill VA directly for tuition, veterans who enroll in expensive short-term classes often don’t pay close attention to how much they cost.

Another fundamental problem: a dearth of rules governing the quality of training at trade schools.

Unlike other federal student-aid programs, the GI Bill does not require trade schools to obtain academic accreditation. Lawmakers carved out an exception to allow veterans to attend vocational schools that do not grant degrees, as well as work-study programs and apprenticeships.

The weak regulations are compounded by poor supervision. VA has contractual arrangements with state officials to help approve and monitor GI Bill schools — especially unaccredited ones — and to make sure they comply with the few quality-assurance standards that exist. Many state agencies, in turn, lack resources to be effective watchdogs, according to veteran advocacy groups and the agencies themselves.

Trade schools have largely escaped scrutiny because lawmakers and VA officials have focused their attention for the past two decades on the rapid growth of online colleges and universities that cater to veterans but have drawn complaints about quality. Trade schools, which students are required to attend in person, are a far smaller group. But they account for an outsize share of GI Bill fraud, The Post found.

The Post made multiple requests to interview Kenneth Smith, the executive director of VA's Education Service, for this investigation. The department declined.

In response to a written list of questions, VA Press Secretary Quinn Slaven said The Post's findings that more than \$300 million has been lost to fraud during roughly the past decade represents "less than 0.3 percent of VA's educational budget" during that period, "underscoring the fact that protecting Veterans and taxpayers from fraud is a top VA priority."

At the same time, he blamed state governments for enabling fraud within the GI Bill program.

"The problem is that many state-level bureaucrats have looked the other way for years as fraudsters robbed government programs blind," Slaven said in an emailed statement. He said a White House anti-fraud task force led by Vice President JD Vance "is moving at unprecedented speed and ferocity to root out the waste, abuse and criminal exploitation of government programs in these areas and others."

To examine the scope of GI Bill fraud and gain insight into how schools cheated taxpayers and veterans, The Post sought financial and enrollment databases from VA under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), as well as records from investigations conducted by the VA Office of Inspector General since the first Trump administration.

The government denied the requests, citing privacy exemptions. But The Post filed a lawsuit to compel the release of the material, arguing that disclosure was in the public's interest.

After a year-long legal battle, VA and its inspector general's office released some of the databases and more than 8,000 pages of documents from 20 fraud investigations that resulted in criminal convictions or civil fines. The Post also reviewed more than 10,000 pages of federal court records and trial transcripts. You were gifted this article and obtained about 1,500 a Postpages subscriber. of publicWant to read records from more? state agencies in Texas,

California, New Hampshire, Georgia and Florida that were responsible for monitoring most of the 20 schools investigated for fraud.

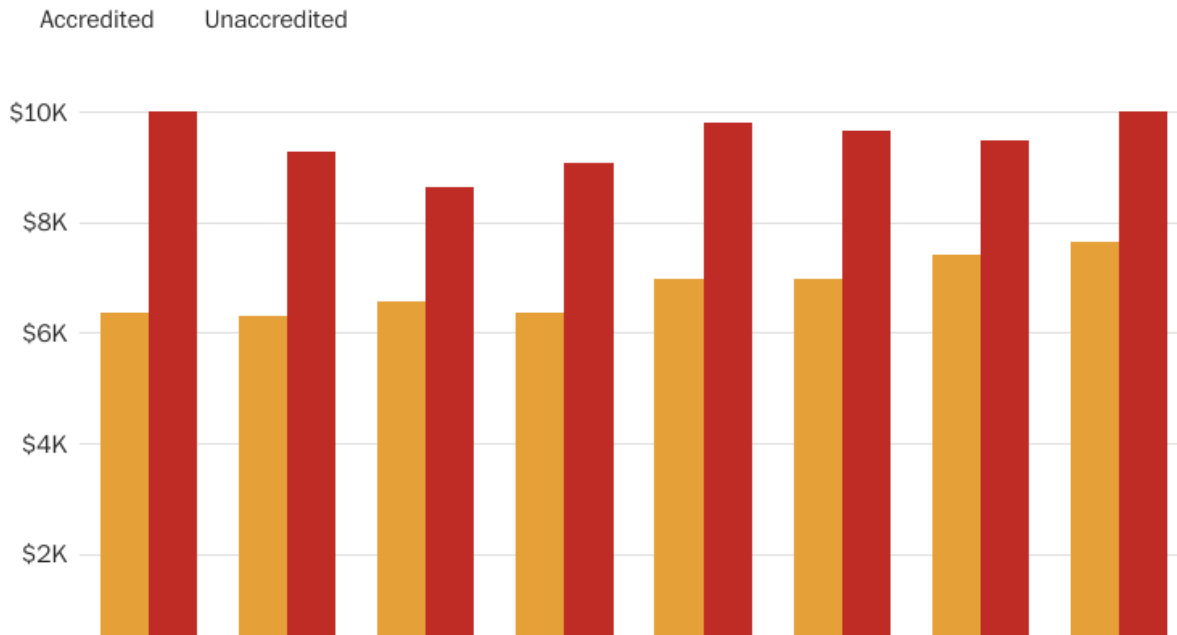
The total losses to the government in those investigations exceeded \$300 million. Fifteen of the 20 cases involved unaccredited trade schools.

The documents, combined with dozens of independent interviews with veterans and school officials, lay bare the extent of the fraud for the first time and underscore VA's failure to tackle the root causes.

Almost all the schools that were investigated had violated VA's rules for years before they were caught. Most packed their courses with too many veterans and not enough civilians, or else charged veterans more — which is against the law.

Unaccredited educational institutions cost more

Average tuition fees for enrolled GI Bill beneficiaries at unaccredited institutions have exceeded fees at accredited institutions for years.



Unaccredited educational institutions cost more. Average tuition fees for enrolled GI Bill beneficiaries at unaccredited institutions have exceeded fees at accredited institutions for years. Source: Department of Veterans Affairs Comparison Tool.

Investigators found that one barber college in Mississippi illegally charged times more for veterans than other students. Some schools falsely claimed they had been in operation for years. At several trade schools, administrators had criminal records that went undiscovered for years because VA and state agencies aren't required to conduct background checks.

Some veteran advocacy groups say that VA does not have sufficient tools, expertise or political will to prevent or rein in fraud.

"In truth, the configuration of the program is so fundamentally flawed that almost anything goes at any price — and therein lies the problem," said Barmak Nassirian, a vice president at Veterans Education Success, a Washington-based

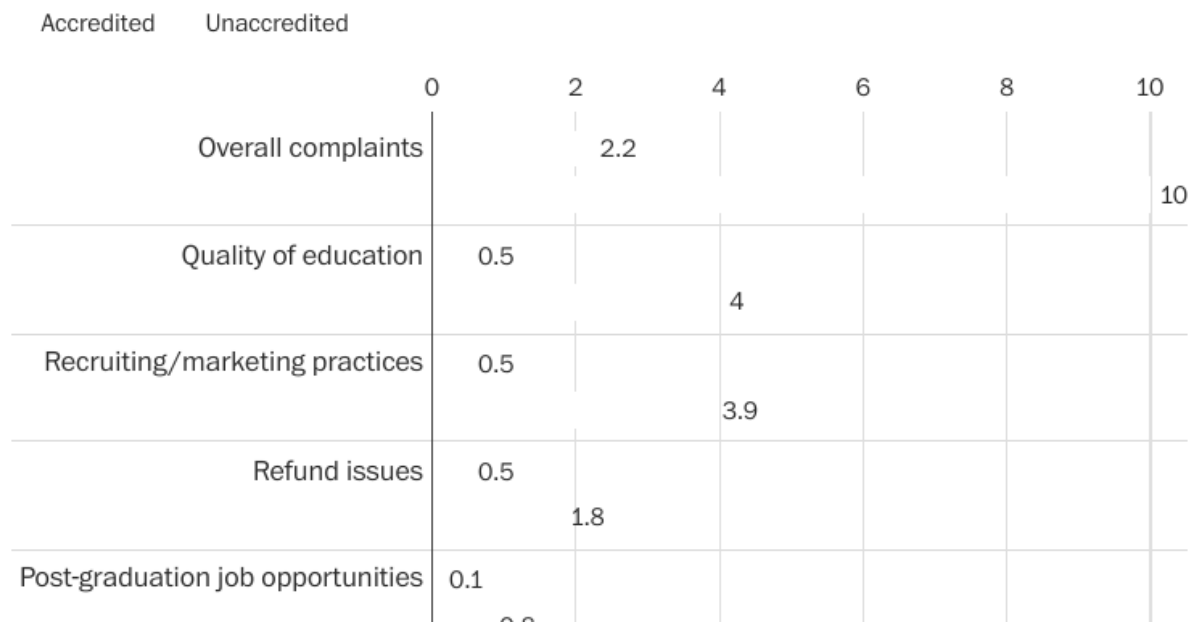
nonprofit that lobbies for GI Bill improvements. "I always wondered why the mob stuck to drug dealing and organized crime. Get into this racket. It's easier money."

According to a Post analysis of VA data, unaccredited schools cost taxpayers more money on average than accredited ones: Tuition rates at unaccredited schools were 30 percent higher. About 59,000 people, or roughly 6 percent of all GI Bill students, attended unaccredited institutions in 2025.

Veterans also filed complaints with VA about unaccredited programs at a rate nearly five times higher than for accredited ones, federal data shows.

Quality of education

Complaint rates were generally higher at unaccredited educational institutions in 2025.



Quality of education. Complaint rates were generally higher at unaccredited educational institutions in 2025. Rate per 1,000 students. Source: Department of Veterans Affairs Comparison Tool.

A long history of rip-offs

The GI Bill rules designed to prevent waste, fraud and abuse have been largely unchanged for decades.

Two weeks after Allied forces invaded Normandy on D-Day, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act. Known as the GI Bill, it provided educational benefits and other financial aid to returning veterans.

Millions of former GIs took advantage. So did the trade school industry. Within five years, the number of for-profit vocational schools in the United States tripled, government records show. A wave of fraud followed.

Many trade schools embraced dodgy marketing tactics. Some television-repair programs, for example, offered free TV sets to get veterans in the door and then fleeced VA for their tuition.



President Franklin D. Roosevelt, accompanied by members of Congress, the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars, signs the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, better known as the GI Bill, into law in 1944. (Bettmann Archive/Getty Images)

By 1952, about 140 schools were facing criminal fraud investigations. A House of Representatives report at the time concluded there was “no doubt that hundreds of millions of dollars have been frittered away on worthless training.”

During the Korean War, as millions more veterans became eligible for GI Bill benefits, Congress imposed rules intended to ensure quality amid another influx of unaccredited, for-profit trade schools.

First, lawmakers decreed that veterans on the GI Bill could make up no more than 85 percent of the students in a course, and that schools had to charge the same tuition You were gifted for veterans this article and by a Post nonveterans subscriber. alike. Want to read more?

Second, unaccredited trade schools had to be in business for at least two years before they could enroll veterans under the GI Bill.

The logic behind the rules was that if a school had a track record — with at least some civilians willing to pay full price — then it probably provided an adequate education. In practice, however, compliance hinged to a large degree on an honor system.

Today, the government still allows schools to self-report their enrollment and tuition data. Auditors are supposed to visit schools to conduct compliance surveys, but they must provide notice.

State agencies such as veterans commissions or education departments — many of them underresourced — approve and provide direct oversight of GI Bill schools on VA's behalf under federal law.

VA requires schools to post course catalogues and calendars online, and to provide evidence to officials of “financial soundness.” But state regulators — and VA — pay almost no attention to what is going on in the classroom, said Nassirian, the vice president of Veterans Education Success.

“As long as the paperwork is right, the question of what did you teach and how much is a non-question,” he said.

A 2018 audit by the VA inspector general’s office found that neither the states nor the federal government had effective financial controls in place. The audit estimated that VA could make \$2.3 billion in “improper” GI Bill payments over the next five years. It also found that the risk of problems was “particularly high” at for-profit schools.

In his statement to The Post, Slaven, the VA press secretary, highlighted recent actions the department has taken to prevent fraud.

Earlier this year, he said, VA created a tool that assigns a fraud risk score to schools. In addition, he said, VA’s Education Service started a Compliance, Investigations and Enforcement Division to spot fraud risks and refer cases to the inspector general’s office.

Slaven said risk factors for fraud at GI Bill schools include rapid increases in enrollment, rapid increases in tuition, a rising volume of complaints, low course completion rates and “predatory advertising and recruiting practices.” He also said VA performs “targeted risk-based reviews” at schools that generate serious complaints or that data analysis indicates are at “serious risk of non-compliance.”

“VA is focused on protecting Veterans and taxpayers from fraud like never before,” he added.

Between 2020 and 2024, the VA inspector general’s office opened investigations into suspected education fraud and referred 47 cases to the Justice Department for prosecution or civil enforcement, according to data that the office provided to The Post.

Most of the investigations focused on unaccredited for-profit trade schools. Current and former VA officials, however, said they suspect those cases represent only a tiny percentage of the fraud that occurs. They said VA’s education division places a higher priority on processing payments on behalf of veterans than on preventing or detecting fraud.

“There’s a lot of fraud in the education program,” Michael Missal, who headed the inspector general’s office from 2016 to 2025, said in an interview. “We found lots of issues.”

You were gifted this article In an interview by The with a Post subscriber. Post, Want the current to read more? VA inspector general, Cheryl Mason, said fraudulent GI Bill schools “are becoming more creative” and “sophisticated” in their schemes.

“The VA is a whole pot of money. All the fraudsters see that,” she said. “They want to go after taxpayer dollars that VA has been given to support our veterans and their families.”

Mason added that unaccredited schools pose a special problem because “there’s less independent vetting” and limited government oversight. “Staying on top of them is a challenge.”



Cheryl Mason, inspector general for the Department of Veterans Affairs, said fraudulent GI Bill schools are becoming more “sophisticated” in their schemes. (Caroline Gutman/For The Washington Post)

An undercover sting

In May 2018, a VA employee was startled to discover that for three years the government had been paying NTI Organic Lawn Care Institute, a trade school based in Amherst, N.H., as much as \$14,900 in tuition per student to show veterans how to grow grass.

Even more surprising: The course took only four or five days to complete.

“It could be that [a supervisor] is aware of how this school operates and everything is above board,” the VA employee, who worked at a payment- processing center in Oklahoma, emailed several colleagues at the time. “However, I felt this warranted your review.”

Another VA official agreed in an email that the tuition was “enormously expensive” and questioned whether a lawn-care program should qualify as a vocational school under the GI Bill.

The discovery prompted the VA inspector general’s office to open an investigation into the unaccredited lawn-care institute, which was run by a married couple in their 40s, Tom and Debra Kelly.

Tom had been in the lawn-care business for three decades and previously owned a turf company called “The Lawn Dawg.” Debra was in charge of signing up GI Bill students and billing VA, according to court records and investigative files.

Investigators suspected that the NTI Organic Lawn Care Institute was breaking VA’s rule that tuition must cost the same for veterans and civilians; they doubted any civilians would pay \$14,900 of their own money to learn how to grow grass, federal documents show.

They set up an undercover sting operation.

In January 2019, a special agent with the VA inspector general — posing as a former soldier named “Brendan” — called the school and secretly recorded the conversation. Brendan said he was a 100 percent disabled veteran with post- traumatic stress disorder and looking for a new career, according to investigators’ files.

A school employee told Brendan he had called the right place: The institute was the only organic lawn-care school in the country certified under the GI Bill. His \$14,900 in tuition would be fully covered by VA. At the end of the course, he'd receive a free backpack sprayer and enough "product" to start his own grass-growing business.

Debra Kelly then got on the line. She told Brendan it was so easy to make money in organic lawn care that it was like "shooting fish in a barrel," according to a partial transcript of the call.

"This is perfect for you," she said.

A few weeks later, another undercover agent visited the school, posing as a divorced IT salesman who had never served in the military, according to investigators' files.

The agent explained that he was interested in the course because he wanted to get out of the IT business and work with a buddy outdoors. This time, Tom Kelly gave the sales pitch.

"We do chemical lawncare, we do organic lawncare," he said. "We just invite everyone to the party."

As investigators suspected would happen, Tom Kelly quoted the undercover agent a much lower price to take the course: \$4,900, or \$10,000 less than what the school charged veterans.

Separately, agents found and interviewed three civilians who had attended the school without paying any tuition, which investigators determined was done so the institute could inflate the number of nonveteran students, the files show. One student said the Kellys paid him \$300 to attend "because they needed a body for the training."

In August 2019, law enforcement officials raided the school's offices, seizing records and digital evidence. The school was soon forced to shut down.

By then, it had charged VA about \$2.1 million in tuition to educate 157 veterans, according to investigators' files.

Investigators presented their findings to federal prosecutors. After four years, the U.S. attorney's office for New Hampshire decided not to bring criminal charges. Instead, the Justice Department filed a civil complaint against Debra Kelly under the False Claims Act, alleging she had defrauded VA by violating the 85 percent rule. (The company and Tom Kelly were not named in the suit.)

In 2024, Debra Kelly reached a settlement, agreeing to pay \$200,000 to the government, court records show.

Neither she nor Tom Kelly responded to interview requests or questions from The Post. The Kellys divorced after the school closed, according to federal court records.

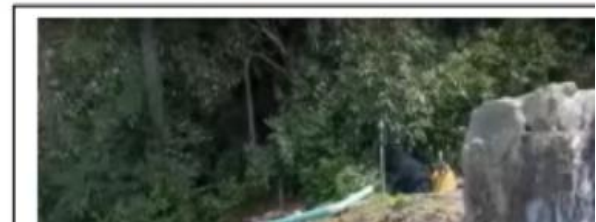
'It was all a lie'

Before opening StoneMakers Academy in 2010, David Montoya had a multistate trail of bad debts and tax liens dating to the 1980s, according to federal and state court records. In his home state of New Mexico, he had spent four years in jail, the records show.

In New Hampshire, Montoya opened the small masonry school that taught other contractors a proprietary rock-building technique he had developed.

Montoya's quick-drying mix of cement and "nanofibers" could be molded into imitation rocks and boulders for backyard patios, retaining walls and decorative waterfalls. In a federal court filing, his attorney described the product as "revolutionary" and "magical," citing glowing customer reviews.

The Manchester-based business hit pay dirt two years later, when it received approval to enroll veterans under the GI Bill.



Video stills, as seen in a sentencing memorandum, show the work done by StoneMakers Academy. (Obtained by The Washington Post)

Montoya and StoneMakers sales agents marketed the school on Facebook, YouTube and other websites, promising to teach veterans a lucrative new trade — in just eight days. The school emphasized that VA would cover full tuition, according to promotional brochures and videos. Courses were offered in New Hampshire during the summer and in Florida during the winter.

What StoneMakers Academy didn't advertise was the sticker price for veterans: \$18,500.

Michael Nguyen, an Army veteran from Florida then in his mid-20s, signed up for a StoneMakers class in Orlando in 2016. In an interview with The Post, he said he paid no attention to the cost, but figured the school “must be legit” because VA notified him that it would take care of the bill.

Nguyen said he and about 30 other students spent the first day in a rented conference room where Montoya taught the basics of molding cement. But,

Nguyen added, when Montoya tried to demonstrate the hardness and durability of a fake rock sample, it cracked into pieces.

After that, Nguyen said, the students were divided into crews and spent the remainder of the eight-day course assigned to work at jobsites “as free labor.” Nguyen said he stuck it out but returned home feeling disgusted.

“I was wondering how VA could approve something like that,” he said. “Basically, it was all a lie.” He said that he filed a complaint with VA afterward but that “nobody got back to me.”

VA officials have said in public statements that they review complaints and forward ones that they consider “valid” to schools to resolve. The department also posts online the number of complaints a school has generated in the previous 24 months. But according to veterans’ advocacy groups, VA seldom investigates the validity of complaints and has no simple mechanism to compel schools to correct problems.

In July 2017, VA's inspector general opened an investigation. By then, VA had paid StoneMakers about \$15 million to train nearly 1,000 veterans, federal documents show.

VA and the state of New Hampshire had been aware from the outset that StoneMakers charged hefty sums to train veterans "how to make concrete look like rocks," according to a memo written by a VA official. But the investigation was triggered when a VA employee reported suspicions to the inspector general's office that the school was falsifying its accounting records, according to the case file.

Federal agents soon found evidence of that — and more.

A whistleblower who worked at StoneMakers Academy told investigators that the school served as "a gravy train" for Montoya and that he used students as free labor on his jobs. The whistleblower reported that virtually all the students were veterans — in clear violation of VA rules — and that StoneMakers kept phony class rosters, according to investigators' notes.

In an interview with The Post, the whistleblower described StoneMakers as "a boiler room-type operation" that exploited many veterans who were down on their luck, including those suffering from combat injuries and drug or alcohol problems. (The whistleblower spoke to The Post on the condition of anonymity because the person helped law enforcement as a confidential informant.)

Federal agents asked the whistleblower to secretly record phone conversations with the vice president of StoneMakers Academy, an attorney named Rhonda Simpson, who was responsible for ensuring that StoneMakers complied with VA rules, investigators' files show.

In one of the recorded calls, she urged the whistleblower not to cooperate with agents and to feign ignorance of the VA mandate that no more than 85 percent of students could be on the GI Bill.

"You have to pretend that you don't know what that rule is all about," Simpson said, according to an excerpt from the call transcript.

Simpson and Montoya had been doctoring spreadsheets and forging enrollment contracts that they submitted to VA, concealing how StoneMakers Academy had been routinely violating the 85 percent rule and charging veterans far more than civilians, court records show.

StoneMakers Academy closed in 2018, when it became clear the school was in legal jeopardy.

In 2019, investigators presented their case to federal prosecutors in New Hampshire. But the lead prosecutor retired and progress on the case slowed, investigators' files show.

In May 2024, Montoya and Simpson each pleaded guilty to conspiracy to make false statements to federal officials.

Prosecutors recommended that both defendants receive probationary sentences, arguing to the judge that no fraud occurred at StoneMakers because the rock-making courses, dubious as they were, took place as advertised.

U.S. District Judge Paul Barbadoro refused to accept the sentencing recommendation, however, calling it "extremely generous."

Barbadoro said it appeared that Montoya and Simpson "deliberately tried to trick the government so that they could receive millions of dollars in payments that they were not entitled to receive." He also suggested that VA was "stupid" for having weak rules and failing to enforce them.

In the end, the judge gave both defendants home detention for one year, followed by three years of probation. They were also each ordered to pay \$200,000 in restitution to VA.

Neither Montoya nor Simpson responded to interview requests for this article.

At her sentencing in June 2025, Simpson apologized.

"I acknowledge that things happened on my watch that should not have, and for that I am truly sorry," she said.

Obvious red flags

In Texas — the state with the most veterans — VA relies on a state agency, the Texas Veterans Commission, to approve unaccredited trade schools under the GI Bill and review the qualifications of applicants.

Schools must show that they have adequate classroom space and equipment, as well as a written curriculum, qualified instructors and an academic calendar. They also need to prove that they've been in operation for at least two years and that they are financially stable.

Even by those bare-minimum standards, however, the state commission failed to detect obvious red flags with Retail Ready Career Center, the air-conditioning repair school that yielded \$72 million in losses for VA.

Based in the city of Garland, near Dallas, Retail Ready was started by Jonathan Dean Davis, a high school dropout with a history of failed business ventures.

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Jonathan Dean Davis in 2019 outside Retail Ready Career Center, in Garland, Texas. In 2021, a jury convicted Davis on 11 counts of wire fraud and money laundering, finding that he had defrauded VA by lying about the school's finances. (Brian Elledge/Dallas Morning News)

When Davis applied to the Texas Veterans Commission in 2014 for permission to enroll veterans under the GI Bill, the school existed in name only. He was also in financial straits, court records show. He owed about \$1 million to creditors and faced a felony charge after bouncing a \$25,000 check.

Utilities in his apartment had been turned off, and he was brushing his teeth with melted ice. "I really don't have much left that I can pawn," he wrote in an electronic You were gifted this journal that article by was later a Post seized by subscriber. authorities. Want to read "... More days without more? money are ahead, and begging for miracles."

In a desperate bid to tap into the GI Bill, Davis concealed his legal and financial distress from the Texas Veterans Commission and falsely claimed he had sufficient cash to operate the school for three months, according to his journal and trial testimony. He also falsely stated that Retail Ready had been in existence for two years, federal court records show.

for you to stay as long as you need.

In July 2014, the commission approved the school's application without conducting a criminal-background check or an independent review of Davis's finances, according to trial testimony and court filings.

The agency also approved Retail Ready's sky-high tuition: between \$18,000 and \$20,000 per student for a six-week course, or 10 times what many Texas community colleges charged for an entire semester.

Officials with the Texas Veterans Commission declined The Post's request for an interview but provided responses to written questions. It said that tuition and fees must be disclosed to students before they enroll. But the commission added that "there is no statutory authority" that grants it "the ability to determine or regulate what constitutes a 'reasonable' tuition or fee rate."

Retail Ready marketed the course to veterans around the country, promising that the GI Bill would also cover their airfare and living expenses in Texas. Soon, VA was paying the school more than \$1 million a month to train scores of veterans.

Davis spent \$428,000 on a Lamborghini, \$282,000 on a Ferrari, \$260,000 on a Bentley Continental GT and lesser sums on two Mercedes-Benzes and a Dodge Ram pickup. He also bought a \$2.2 million Dallas mansion with a grand piano, a home movie theater and a gymnasium, court records show. In addition, Davis acknowledged spending "under \$200,000" at strip clubs.



A \$2.2 million Dallas mansion owned by Davis of Retail Ready Career Center, as seen in court documents. (Obtained by The Washington Post)



A Ferrari, from court documents, that Davis bought for \$282,000. (Obtained by The Washington Post)



A Lamborghini that Davis bought for \$428,000, as seen in court documents. (Obtained by The Washington Post)



Davis's Dallas mansion, as seen in court documents, included a grand piano.

In 2017, a former Retail Ready employee filed a complaint with the Texas Veterans Commission, alleging financial misconduct by the school, commission documents show. Commission staff showed up for a site visit. They reviewed the school's books and found nothing wrong, according to the documents.

The complaint, however, also triggered a referral to VA's inspector general, which began its own investigation. Agents raided the school and Davis's house. They confiscated Davis's electronic journal, in which he said he had lied on the school's GI Bill application about his finances and legal problems, public records show.

In 2020, Davis was indicted on charges including wire fraud and money laundering. During his trial, prosecutors portrayed the school's tuition rates as outrageous and emphasized how Davis used the money to live the high life. A parade of veterans testified that they received lousy training and that their GI Bill benefits were wasted.

"This case was about three things: lies, greed and the military veterans that the You were gifted this article defendant used toby getarich," Post subscriber. Want the Douglas Brasher, to read lead more? prosecutor, told the jury. 25

Other veterans, who testified as witnesses for the defense, said they were satisfied with their experience at Retail Ready. Brandon Moulding, a Marine veteran from North Carolina, said it launched him on a successful career as a service technician making \$22 an hour. "I wouldn't have gotten as far as I have without going through that school."

Defense attorneys also noted, accurately, that the tuition rates were no secret: They had been approved by VA and the Texas Veterans Commission and were disclosed in each student's contract with the school.

In 2021, the jury convicted Davis on 11 counts of wire fraud and money laundering, finding that he had defrauded VA by lying about the school's finances and falsely stating it had been in operation for two years before it enrolled veterans.

U.S. District Judge Brantley Starr sentenced him to nearly 20 years in prison and ordered him to pay \$65 million in restitution.

In an interview with The Post from a minimum-security federal prison outside Dallas, Davis said he was wrongly convicted.

Prosecutors, he said, were “trying to show that I’m living a lavish lifestyle and that the students weren’t getting a quality education because I was too busy spending the money on a Lamborghini and a mansion.”

“You show me a law that it’s a crime to buy nice cars,” he added.

“On the surface, yes, 20 grand for six weeks sounds absolutely absurd,” Davis said of the school’s tuition. But he said it paid for a student’s airfare to Dallas, six weeks of lodging and meals, plus a large placement office that arranged job interviews.

Retail Ready, he said, was hardly the only school to reap millions from the federal government.

“Every school is in existence for profit,” he said. Harvard, he noted, “pays zero dollars in property taxes and government taxpayers still shovel billions of dollars to them. Well, what do people think happens with that money? Does anybody not think that any of those school administrators drives a Ferrari?”

Nate Jones and Caitlin Gilbert contributed to this report.

Methodology

The Washington Post obtained comprehensive records spanning 2018 to 2024 from the Department of Veterans Affairs’ GI Bill Comparison Tool via the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and merged them with VA’s 2025 Comparison Tool data pulled from the Internet Archive. Data is current as of May 2025.

The Post grouped non-degree-granting schools into categories – such as unaccredited trade specialization or flight schools – based on their accreditation status, facility codes and specific course offerings. VA tracks two separate enrollment statuses, counting all GI Bill participants and those who served after 9/11. Unless specified, enrollment figures were based on whichever figure was higher in the data. Tuition rates were based on post- 9/11 enrollment because tuition figures were available only in post-9/11 data. Information on unaccredited and vocational programs is often incomplete, so reporters used school addresses found in the FOIA data to query the Google Places API and gather missing business statuses and classification types.

About this story

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