

Testimony of Rep. Jim Himes (CT-04)

“H.R. 3634, the Securing Electronic Records for Veteran’s Ease (SERVE) Act”

Before the House Committee Veterans’ Affairs

Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity

October 11, 2017

Thank you Chairman Arrington, Ranking Member O’Rourke and distinguished members of the subcommittee for the opportunity to testify today on H.R. 3634, the Securing Electronic Records for Veteran’s Ease, or SERVE Act. I would also like to thank my distinguished colleagues who have cosponsored this legislation including, Rep. Coffman, Rep. Holmes Norton, Rep. Crowley and Rep. Esty.

Veterans and their families face real challenges when they transition to civilian life. We have an important responsibility to do what we can to help. Finding housing – a roof over their heads – should not be an ordeal, especially if it is caused by difficulties in showing the stipend that veterans get from Uncle Sam.

In conversations with student veterans throughout my district, proof of income for housing kept coming up as a big challenge. Nicholas Quinzi, a Marine and founder of the Student Veterans Club at Sacred Heart University, told my office that if he had a wish list of things to make his veteran experience better, the number one item would be fixing the lack of verification for the monthly housing stipend.

“I am a full-time student,” he said. “I can’t really have a full-time job while taking 5 or 6 classes a semester as well as summer classes, so my income isn’t really ‘income,’ which means there is no way of procuring a house. Even attempting to rent is a nightmare.”

The fact that Nicholas, and many veterans like him, have no proof of income that a property management firm could consider when weighing credit worthiness and income qualifications is silly.

Here’s the commonsense fix: H.R. 3634 would require the Department of Veteran Affairs make documentation of Post 9/11 GI Bill monthly housing stipend accessible and available online. Student veterans will use this documentation to provide needed verification to housing agents, leasing companies, apartment managers, and landlords.

This legislation could have a big effect. Currently there are approximately 1.1 million students using the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Even if a fraction of those veterans have had an issue with obtaining housing because of this issue, that would mean tens of thousands of student veterans and their beneficiaries that would have one less things to worry about if this bill were to become law.

I appreciate the VA's attention to this issue, and understand that they support the intent of the bill but feel that the goals of the legislation been met with the availability of a statement of benefits. Unfortunately, the statement of benefits does not solve the problem. Not all authorized Post 9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries have access to the statement of benefits on Vets.gov and the statement is not always accepted as proof of income for receipt of the housing stipend. The statement of benefits also includes personal data and information that veterans may not wish to share.

An official form, accessible on the e-benefits portal verifying the benefit is necessary. This functionality already exists for civil service preference, commissary and exchange privileges, proof of service cards and VA compensation and pension benefit verification.

In closing, I would like to thank the subcommittee for its consideration of the Securing Electronic Records for Veteran's Ease Act and I look forward to working with the members of the committee to continue to support our student veterans.