

Our Statement for the Record on the Topic of “Path of Purpose: Restoring the VA VR&E Program to Effectively Serve Veterans”

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD
SUBMITTED TO THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
119TH CONGRESS, FIRST SESSION

JULY 16, 2025

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, 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 believe that comprehensive support and access to high-quality postsecondary education and workforce training are essential to helping veterans transition successfully into civilian life. These investments not only change individual lives—they strengthen our economy. VR&E is one of the VA's most vital programs, providing veterans with service-connected disabilities the tools they need to “prepare for, obtain, and maintain suitable employment.”^[1] We are grateful to the Subcommittee for its continued attention to this critical program.

Following our previous statements to the Subcommittee in 2019, 2022 and 2024, we have continued to receive complaints from veterans about VR&E.^{[2],[3],[4]} The recent complaints 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.

Veterans who reach 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 or even assigned to new VR&E offices, and they receive 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.

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.

We have heard from numerous veterans that VR&E counselors will not approve programs at prestigious four-year universities because of cost, regardless of any demonstrated increase in the likelihood of employment. At the same time, we have heard that some VR&E counselors explicitly steered students to online for-profit schools with similarly high costs.

A veteran shared that he was accepted into a highly regarded business school at an Ivy League institution. The veteran said his 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.”

Similarly, another veteran planned to attend a prestigious arts institution, after gaining experience, connections, and recommendations in her field of study. The VR&E counselor 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 suggested schools, including that the school’s prestige would provide greater opportunities for employment in a competitive field.

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 and arbitrary, causing tremendous stress.

We frequently hear from students that the VR&E application process and subsequent decisions seem to be arbitrary or unreasonable given the students' disabilities and employment goals.

Many veterans have complained that they have difficulty using VR&E for graduate or professional degrees. One student recently shared that, when he inquired about a PhD program, his counselor told him, "We don't say the word 'doctor' around here." Another veteran who contacted us explained that his VR&E counselor would not consider approving him for a doctoral program. Instead, the VR&E counselor approved the veteran for a Master's level program that would qualify the veteran only for work incompatible with the veteran's disability. The counselor did not address the veteran's concern that the program would not provide suitable employment.

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 the value of certain advanced degrees, especially for a veteran with a disability who already possesses a post-secondary credential.

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

In the VA's testimony today, they acknowledged the stark reality facing veterans applying for this program. There is a burgeoning backlog of VR&E cases (over 186,000 pending cases) causing veterans to have unacceptably "high wait times." In fact the VA disclosed today that the current staffing ratio is 1 counselor to every 175 clients, well above the current goal of 1 to 125 and a far cry from our recommended 1 to 85. Additionally, veterans are sometimes assigned multiple successive counselors or even assigned to new VR&E offices,

A veteran who had been seeking stable employment since 2022 recently shared that she met with a counselor who approved her for benefits, collected information about her program, and verbally informed her that it would be approved. Two weeks later, she was reassigned to a new counselor in another state who required her to resubmit all the

information she had already provided and then denied her program. She is now left struggling to figure out what to do, as her program is supposed to begin next month.

Similarly, another student shared, “Despite applying and being evaluated three separate times—at three different regional offices—I have not received any benefits or assistance through the program. ...These inconsistencies have delayed my education by over a year. I am still unhoused and unemployed as of this writing, having been caught in an institutional cycle that retraumatizes veterans while failing to uphold VA’s Duty to Assist.”

A veteran shared with us, “From personal experience, I have encountered significant hurdles in navigating the VR&E process. The complexities, delays, and frequent misunderstandings have caused considerable frustration and impacted my educational and professional goals. Unfortunately, my situation is not unique. Numerous fellow veterans here at [school] are facing similar challenges, often left feeling unsupported and overwhelmed while attempting to secure benefits they’ve earned through their dedicated service.”

A student also shared his counselor’s perspective: “I really do try and assist everyone, but it is a daunting task!! I work all the OT they will give me and often hours spent after hours. I hope they take action, but am guarded.”

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. In the VA’s testimony today, VA disclosed that the current staffing ratio is 1 to 175 with a backlog of over 186,000 cases (up 52% over the past 5 years).^[5] This backlog is unacceptable.
- **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.** 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. We are encouraged to hear that the VA has launched their Readiness and Employment System (RES) nationwide which will hopefully modernize the current byzantine VR&E case management system.
- **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. [\[6\]](#)
- **Proper Oversight.** We concur with the VA Office Inspector General (OIG)'s findings that VA needs to implement proper oversight of the VR&E program to “overcome oversight gaps [that] limit visibility into program compliance and increase the risk that fraud will go undetected.” [\[7\]](#) Specifically, the VA needs to conduct routine compliance surveys of VR&E-only approved schools, ensure

VR&E students are included in compliance reviews for GI Bill approved schools and implement internal controls that non-GI bill approved programs taught at GI Bill approved schools are not inadvertently approved for VR&E students.

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.

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.

^[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-E-O-September-15-2022.pdf>

[4] Veterans Education Success, "Statement for the Record on the Topic of "Examining the Effectiveness of the Veterans Readiness and Employment (VR&E) Program," December 11, 2024.

<https://vetsedsuccess.org/our-statement-for-the-record-on-the-topic-of-examining-the-effectiveness-of-the-veterans-readiness-and-employment-vre-program/>

[5] Department of Veterans Affairs, J. MARGARITA DEVLIN ACTING PRINCIPAL DEPUTY UNDER SECRETARY FOR BENEFITS, "PERFORMING THE DELEGABLE DUTIES OF UNDER SECRETARY FOR BENEFITS VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA) BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY U.S HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ON PATH OF PURPOSE: RESTORING THE VA VR&E PROGRAM TO EFFECTIVELY SERVE VETERANS," JULY 16, 2025.

<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR10/20250716/118499/HHRG-119-VR10-Wstate-DevlinJ-20250716.pdf>

[6] 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/>

[7] Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Inspector General, "STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL US DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS TO THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS US HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES HEARING ON PATH OF PURPOSE: RESTORING THE VA VR&E PROGRAM TO EFFECTIVELY SERVE VETERANS," JULY 16, 2025.

<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR10/20250716/118499/HHRG-119-VR10-20250716-SD002.pdf>