



Veterans Benefits Administration



Veteran's Advisory Committee on Education (VACOE)

December 9-10, 2020

1PM-4PM Eastern Time

Executive Summary

Meeting Minutes

Purpose: The purpose of the Veterans' Advisory Committee on Education (VACOE) is to provide advice and recommendations to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs on the administration of education benefits programs and services for Veterans, Service members, Reservists, National Guard personnel and eligible dependents under Chapters 30, 32, 33, 35 and 36 of title 38, and Chapters 1606 of title 10, United States Code.

The purpose of the meeting is for the Committee to prioritize and modify existing recommendations not approved for action previously submitted to the Secretary, discuss proposition for establishment of subcommittees to determine new recommendations, provide information centered around the GI Bill user database, automation tools, distance education and online learning outcomes and measures, and COVID response outcomes.

Rules of Engagement: Terry Warren, Sr. Management Analyst, conducted daily rules of engagement. Also indicated that the meeting is open to the public and is recorded daily.

Transcription Services: Provided by Jamison Professional Services

Education Service Staff Present (Facilitating call):

- Debra Morgan, Sr. Management Analyst, Designated Federal Official (DFO) for Veteran's Advisory Committee on Education (VACOE), Veterans Benefits Administration
- Terry Warren, Sr. Management Analyst, Chief, Stakeholder Engagement, Designated Federal Official (DFO) for Veteran's Advisory Committee on Education (VACOE), Veterans Benefits Administration
- Janet Elder, Management Analyst, Alternate Designated Federal Official (ADFO) for Veteran's Advisory Committee on Education (VACOE), Veterans Benefits Administration

VACOE Members Present:

1. **Mona Dexter - Vice Chair**, Senior Director, Operations & Communications, U.S., Chamber of Commerce Foundation "Hiring Our Heroes"
2. **P. Barry Butler, Ph.D.**, President Embry Riddle Aeronautical University
3. **Ashlynn Haycock**, Deputy Director, Policy, Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS)

4. **Soudark (SUE) Luangkhot Hoppin**, President & Founder, National Military Spouse Network
5. **Jared S. Lyon**, President & CEO of Student Veterans of America (SVA)
6. **Beth E. Morgan**, Director, Higher Education Transition and Partnerships, Center for Veteran Transition and Integration at Columbia University
7. **John T. Quintas**, Brigadier General, USAF, (Retired), Managing Director, Military Affairs, Amazon.com
8. **Darrell L. Roberts**, SMART Union Director of Organizing
9. **Cynthia A. Warrick, Ph.D.**, President, Stillman College
10. **Joseph W. Wescott II, EdD.**, National Higher Education Consultant, America Legion; and National Legislative Liaison NASAA

Education Service Presenters, VBA Presenters and VBA Guests:

- Robert Wilkie, Secretary of Veterans Affairs (presented via recorded video)
- Charmain Bogue, Executive Director, Education Service
- Matthew Ziolkowski, Senior Management Analyst, Education Service
- Terry Warren, Chief Stakeholder Engagement, Education Service
- James Ruhlman, Deputy Director for Program Management, Education Service
- Stephanie Price, Deputy Director for Operations, Education Service
- Donald Ortega, Assistant Director, Operations
- Thomas Alphonso, Assistant Director for Policy and Procedures, Education Service
- Patrick Dworakowski, Assistant Director for Oversight and Accountability, Education
- Joshua Lashbrook, Assistant Director for Operations Support, Education Service

Wednesday, December 9, 2020

Presenters:

- Charmain Bogue, Executive Director, Education Service
- Robert Wilkie, Secretary of Veterans Affairs (presented via recorded video)
- Terry Warren, Chief Stakeholder Engagement, Education Service
- Stephanie Price, Deputy Director for Operations, Education Service
- Donald Ortega, Assistant Director, Operations
- Joshua Lashbrook, Assistant Director for Operations Support, Education Service
- Matthew Ziolkowski, Senior Management Analyst, Education Service
- James Ruhlman, Deputy Director for Program Management, Education Service
- Thomas Alphonso, Assistant Director for Policy and Procedures, Education Service
- Patrick Dworakowski, Assistant Director for Oversight and Accountability, Education

Opening Remarks - Chief Stakeholder Engagement

Mr. Terry Warren, DFO, Chief Stakeholder Engagement, Education Service, called the meeting to order at 1:00PM EST. He reviewed the Rules of Behavior, stating that due to COVID, the meeting is being held virtually.

Introduction and Acknowledgement - Vice Chair

Mr. Warren introduced Mona Dexter, Vice Chair. Ms. Dexter opened the floor by welcoming the committee members and thanking them for joining the meeting this week. She acknowledged that the committee members have all now received their Certificate of Appointment and thanked Janet and Debra for their help with the certificates.

Introduction and Welcome Remarks - Executive Director, Education Service

Ms. Dexter introduced Charmain Bogue, Executive Director, Education Service. Ms. Bogue opened the floor with greeting the members and guests to the Veterans Advisory Committee on Education meeting. She acknowledged the complications presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and commended the Education Service team for standing up to the challenge to take care of the GI Bill students.

Ms. Bogue reviewed the steps taken to work with VSO partners in Congress to ensure that Veterans were still able to receive their monthly housing allowance through the GI Bill regardless of if their school or work study site had closed due to COVID-19. Ms. Bogue also shared how her team was able to implement the IT pieces associated with the Colmery Act, and they are now working with the transition team about the GI Bill and the future of IT modernization for Education Service. Ms. Bogue then thanked the committee for their support and, since no questions or comments were presented for her to respond to, yielded the floor back to Ms. Dexter.

Introduction: Secretary of Veterans Affairs

Ms. Dexter introduced Mr. Robert Wilkie, Secretary of Veterans Affairs. As Mr. Wilkie was unable to attend the meeting, a video was provided with recorded remarks which was then played for the committee.

Mr. Wilkie began by acknowledging that COVID-19 has disrupted the lives of millions of Americans as well as billions around the globe and providing an overview of how VA has risen to meet the needs of Veterans during the pandemic. He commended the VA for being able to support the entire United States healthcare system in times of crisis, which is the VA's fourth mission. He stated that the Caregiver Program will be expanded soon to help family members who care for Veterans. Mr. Wilkie then welcomed the input and participation of the Advisory Committee on VA's shared goals.

Ms. Dexter thanked the Secretary for providing the recorded remarks. She then invited committee members to briefly introduce themselves. However, microphones were disabled, which prompted her to give a brief overview of each committee member's name and title while the microphones were being enabled. Once enabled, she requested committee members to introduce themselves to presenters and stakeholders in attendance.

Committee recessed from 1:15 - 1:30 PM EST

Stakeholder Engagement

Mr. Terry Warren, Chief Stakeholder Engagement, provided an overview of the Education Service's communication posture, including communications with GI Bill beneficiaries through email and social media, the social media accounts utilized, and the GI Bill Sentiment Analysis.

Questions

Mr. Warren answered questions for Dr. Barry Butler.

The question was as follows:

1. Do you have a sense for the ability to ensure a Veteran only needs to make a single phone call to one person in order to get an answer to a question without needing to be forwarded to multiple other people for that answer?

Operations Office

Ms. Stephanie Price, Deputy Director of Operations, introduced the Operations team and their roles. Mr. Don Ortega, Assistant Director for Operations Management, provided an overview of the new Chief of Data Analytics, Mr. Jason Carley; outcome measures initiatives; current budget concerns; the Annual Benefits Report submission to Office of Performance; highlights for Fiscal Year 2020 in regards to Chapter 33 for the Awards Benefit Program; and that the team is working on developing a suite of reports to access data and respond to inquiries more quickly.

Mr. Joshua Lashbrook, Assistant Director for Operations Support, provided an overview of the top five Fiscal Year 2021 education investment priorities; expanding the GI Bill's digital presence; the Education Service System's current state; the vision for the Digital GI Bill; and the progress to date for the Digital GI Bill.

Questions

Ms. Price answered questions for the following individuals: Mr. Quintas, Mr. Roberts, Dr. Wescott, and Dr. Butler.

The questions were as follows:

1. Why does it require legislation to complete the Digital GI Bill?
 - a. What is the expectation that the legislation will come through?
2. Where will funding be transferred from to support the modernization effort?
 - a. What are the options if the transfer isn't approved?
3. Will the modernization effort ensure digital across the board, from universities to apprenticeships?
4. Will this funding be dedicated funding?

- a. Is the funding included in the 250 million dollars requested for VA on December 8, 2020?
5. Is the security side of the modernization effort being handled in a different part of the government or integrated in the current request?

Program Analyst - Workload

Mr. Matthew Ziolkowski, Senior Management and Program Analyst to the Executive Management Officer, provided a detailed overview of workload targets and achievements; number of claims processed; timelines for claim processing; Colmery and Section 501, 107 corrections; updated numbers for current workload; transitioning into the new fiscal year; spring enrollment expectations; targets under the direction of the USB and BDUSB; timeliness of claim processing; pending inventory; St. Louis Regional Processing Office repurposing and transition; and the Mailbox Zero initiative.

Questions

Mr. Ziolkowski answered questions for the following individuals: Sue Hoppin, General John Quintas, Dr. Barry Butler, and Jared Lyon.

The questions were follows:

1. Will beneficiaries experience any lag time during an administration transition?
2. Are the days provided for timelines in business days or calendar days?
3. What is the difference between an original claim and a supplemental claim?
4. Are any of the claims determined automatically through automation?
 - a. What are the constraints to expanding automation of the claims process?
 - a. Are there legal barriers?
 - b. Are there technological barriers?
5. Does somebody keep track of data in order to predict any spikes in school enrollment periods?
6. Do you find added lag time from going interdepartmentally for DOD verification for issuing a certificate of eligibility, et cetera?

Program Management- Policy and Procedures

Mr. James Ruhlman, Deputy Director for Program Management, introduced his two Assistant Directors. They include Mr. Thomas Alphonso, Assistant Director for Policy and Procedures, and Dr. Patrick Dworakowski, Assistant Director for Oversight and Accountability.

Mr. Alphonso provided information on two topics, the difference between residential and distance learning, and accreditation. He gave an overview of the approval needed for distance learning and resident training; what is involved in order to be an accredited institution; limitations on approval for distance learning; monthly housing allowance differences between distance and resident training; statutory changes that need to be made; Public Law 116-128 for resident training students being forced to convert to digital learning; and recent law for temporary and permanent closures for work studies for Veterans utilizing the GI Bill.

Questions

Mr. Alphonso answered questions for the following individuals: Sue Hoppin, Dr. Joseph Wescott, and Mona Dexter

The questions were as follows:

1. Is there a waiver for Veterans who choose to go bachelor to get a housing allowance if they are going back to school?
 - a. Have you ever seen a request for such a waiver?
2. Is the term “independent study” needed to be used still in reference to distance learning?
3. What is half of the national average of the Housing Allowance?
4. If a recipient of the GI Bill has lost their employment due to COVID and chooses to attend an accelerated program only offered online, are they still only eligible for half of the housing rate?
 - a. Are there waivers available for this?

In regards to accreditation, Mr. Alphonso gave an overview of what accredited means at the VA; why accreditation versus non-accreditation is important; schools needing to meet 8515 requirements; universities using fake and misleading advertising; seven statutory provisions to meet for accreditation; and that non-accredited and non-degree programs need to be the most stringent to be eligible to take on GI Bill students.

Questions

Mr. Alphonso answered questions for the following individuals: Sue Hoppin, Mona Dexter, and Dr. Barry Butler.

The questions were as follows:

1. How do you accredit non-college-degree programs?

- a. Do you prioritize programs that mesh up with the Department of Labor's list of fastest growing career fields?
 - b. Or is this a constantly moving target?
 - c. Do you have an established list of career fields and non-degree programs that will be given GI Bill approval?
 - d. Are there programs that are identified as desirable for a certain demographic?
 - e. What is that process?
 - f. How long does it take for them to get approved by the VA for GI Bill payments?
 - g. If they're not approved, what kind of information do they get back? Are they able to come back and provide more information?
2. Is there discussion about the connection between completion of programs and employment outcomes?
 3. Where do employment outcomes fall into the conversation regarding accreditation?
 4. How do you measure outcomes, return on investment, and start building a system by which we can capture that sort of data and present it?

Program Management- Oversight & Accountability

Dr. Patrick Dworakowski, Assistant Director, Oversight & Accountability, provided information on the compliance process; safeguarding the integrity of the GI Bill; ensuring all statute and regulations outlined in 38 U.S.C. and C.F.R. are followed; compliance surveys scheduled throughout the year by region utilizing VA system data and guidance; and protecting taxpayer dollars to address fraud and other concerns. No questions were presented.

Public Comments Discussion

Ms. Dexter thanked the presenters and opened the floor to discuss public comments that had been received to review and guide further deliberation. The committee discussed concerns of certain schools on the list of accredited institutions including ones that had been suspended temporarily, as well as pending legislation that will allow the VA to take actions against schools not complying with GI Bill regulations.

Committee Discussion and Collaboration

Ms. Dexter opened the discussion about collaboration across the committee and forming subcommittees to meet and focus on specific topics based on feedback from previous years and surveys. The topics include user database, benefits, and distance education. Ms. Dexter suggested subcommittee group members and opened the floor for discussion if committee

members had preferences about which group they participated in. It was decided to further discuss the subcommittee assignments and agendas moving forward in the next day's meeting. Ms. Dexter thanked the committee for their time and called the meeting adjourned.

Ms. Dexter adjourned the meeting at 4:04PM EST.

Thursday, December 10, 2020

Opening Remarks

Mr. Terry Warren called the committee to order at 1:00 PM. He reminded the meeting participants of the rules to avoid disruption of the meeting. He informed the participants that the meeting was being recorded and a transcript will be prepared as public record. He then yielded the floor to Vice Chair Ms. Mona Dexter.

Committee Discussion and Closing Remarks

Ms. Dexter welcomed the committee and recapped the goals of the week's meeting, which include prioritizing recommendations and creating subcommittees for the upcoming year. She also recapped the discussion from the day before, noting that the goals of the committee for Fiscal Year 2021 are to enhance the impact of the GI Bill through modernizing education services and IT systems, and focusing on on-the-job training, apprenticeships, and distance learning.

The subcommittees were identified as follows:

- Modernizing Education Service's IT systems: Jared Lyon, Beth Morgan, and General John Quintas, with Jared Lyon as the lead.
- On-the-job training and apprenticeships: Ashlynn Haycock, Sue Hoppin, and Darrell Roberts, with Ashlynn Haycock as the lead.
- Distance learning: Dr. Barry Butler, Dr. Cynthia Warrick, and Dr. Joseph Wescott, with Dr. Joe Wescott as lead.

The committee then discussed how the meetings would be organized virtually, that the DFO will provide logistical foundational support, and that subcommittees should start meeting monthly to begin with. The subcommittees are expected to have a report for the full committee by the next meeting in June. Guests can be invited to participate in subcommittee meetings, but the meetings are closed to the public. The subcommittees will be given a shared drive, the platform to be able to have working documents, and a suggested schedule.

In closing, Ms. Dexter shared that Debra Morgan would be retiring as DFO after 30 years of service to the government. She also thanked Javier Miyares for his service to the committee, as he had retired and was no longer serving on the committee. Ms. Dexter wished the committee happy holidays and adjourned the meeting.

Ms. Dexter adjourned the meeting at 3:00 PM

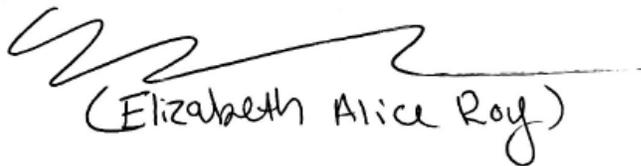
Official Certifications:

State of California

County of Humboldt

I, Elizabeth Alice Roy, Professional Court Reporter in and for the State of California at Jamison Professional Services do hereby certify that I was authorized to and did report said meeting in stenotype; and that the foregoing pages are a true and correct transcription of the audio taken of said hearing.

I further certify that I am not an attorney or counsel of any of the parties, nor am I a relative or employee of any attorney or counsel of any party connection with the action, nor am I financially interested in the action.

 1/14/21
(Elizabeth Alice Roy)

I hereby certify, that to the best of my knowledge, the foregoing minutes are accurate and complete.

Mona Dexter

Mona Dexter
Vice Chair - Veterans Advisory Committee on Education

Debra J. Morgan
Designated Federal Officer (DFO)