U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)
Federal Advisory Committee
Veterans' Advisory Committee on Education (VACOE)
Meeting Minutes for June 5-7, 2023

VACOE Members Present:
Mona Dexter, Chair; Vice President, Military & Veteran Affairs, Comcast NBC Universal
Keith Hauk, Vice Chair; Associate Vice President, Stateside Military Operations, University of Maryland University College (UMGC)
Barry Butler, Ph.D., President, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University
Soudarak (Sue) Luangkhot Hoppin, President and Founder, National Military Spouse Network
Jared S. Lyon, President and CEO, Student Veterans of America (SVA)
John T. Quintas, Major General, USAF, (Retired), Managing Director, Military Affairs, Amazon.com
Darrell L. Roberts, Director of Organizing, International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART)
Cynthia A. Warrick, Ph.D., RPh, President, Stillman College
Violet Velazquez, Reservist, U.S. Navy
Sarah Roberts, former lead of Military and Veteran Programs at LinkedIn
David Salgado, Director, Veterans Education, Texas Veterans Commission

Also Present:
Joseph Maltby, Management Analyst; Designated Federal Officer
Louiseza Sanderson, Alternate Designated Federal Officer
Tom Alphonso, Assistant Director for Policy and Procedures Implementation
Joshua Lashbrook, Lead for Digital GI Bill Program
James Ruhlman, Deputy Director for Program Management in Education Service
Carolyn Renick, Apprenticeship Licensing and Credentialing Lead at DoL VES
Guy Kiyokawa, Acting Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs
Dr. Nicole Morant, Deputy Director for Program Integration
John Boerstler, Veterans Experience Office
Jon Pruett, Veterans Experience Office
Heather Real, Project Lead for Military to Veteran Spouse Experience Project
Mandy Tepfer, Senior Design Advisor for Military to Veteran Spouse Experience Project
Caitlin Goodale-Porter, Member of the Public

Monday, June 5, 2023

Roll Call

Joseph Maltby, Designated Federal Officer for the Committee, called the roll and determined that a quorum was present.

Welcome, Rules of Engagement, and Administrative Announcements

Mr. Maltby welcomed the Committee and shared that there were no major announcements, but that there was a change in assistant designated federal officers from Jill Thomas to Louiseza Sanderson. He then introduced the first speaker of the day, Jeff Moragne, Director of the Advisory Committee and Management Office.

Opening Remarks – Jeff Moragne, Annual Training

Mr. Moragne introduced himself and explained that the purpose of the annual training by the Advisory Committee Management Office is to ensure the Committee members knew the rules and boundaries of their roles as a Committee working with the VA. He emphasized the importance of focusing only on items under their charge as outlined in the Committee's charter. Mr. Moragne then gave a brief history of FACA (Federal Advisory Committee Act), how it was started in 1972 and how it has grown to have 1,000 federal advisory committees today. FACA holds the line on how a federal advisory committee is managed and terminated and everything in between.

He shared how it was imperative to the VA that there is total transparency in their actions, and that members of the public have a right to attend Committee meetings. The only times meetings are not open to the public are if they are performing a site visit or having any discussions which might involve personal details. The Committee can also meet privately if they are doing preparatory work or administrative work. Subcommittees can also hold private meetings to discuss draft recommendations because no decisions are being made in those meetings.

Every meeting needs to show up in the federal register at least 15 days prior, announcing to the public the nature of the meeting, whether it's open, where it's located, and how to access it if it is an open meeting. In addition to this being public information, citizens can ask at any time for minutes or slides from their meetings. He explained that in order to legally meet, the Committee would need to have a signed charter that is reviewed by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs every two years. They also need to have a designated federal officer (DFO) present at all times during a meeting. He also explained the importance of having a quorum, so 50 percent of the membership number plus one, in order for the meeting to be official.

Mr. Moragne informed the Committee that no single member of the Committee can speak for the Committee. If any member of the Committee is asked to speak in an interview or before Congress, they must first notify their DFO who will contact Mr. Moragne, who will contact an OGC ethics person. The member would then be reminded of the rules to follow during such an interview, such as not speaking on behalf of the Committee, and only speaking as a private citizen. They are not allowed to say the Committee thinks this or that or represent themselves as speaking for the Committee in any way.

He moved on to his final slide about best practices, explaining the importance of mastering their calendar, knowing their role, reading the charter annually, and organizing subcommittees. He also suggested the Committee meet with the newest advisory committee, the Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs. He then shared that if they needed research to be done, they can ask the library service which is available to them. The Committee is also allowed to bring in subject matter experts for their insights on the challenges the Committee is facing.

Vice Chair Hauk asked what the process would be if the Committee wanted to make a site visit to a VA campus. Mr. Moragne said they should notify their DFO and go from there. With no further questions, the meeting moved on to the next speaker, Tom Alphonso.

Policies and Procedures Implementation Briefing – Tom Alphonso

Tom Alphonso introduced himself as the Assistant Director for Policy and Procedures Implementation and shared that he would be briefing the Committee on a couple of developments and regulations that are coming out, as well as sharing some definitions the Committee had previously asked for.

He began with AQ89, a State Approving Agencies (SAA) jurisdiction. It's a proposed regulation which is drafted, which is the information he proceeded to share with the Committee. The regulation is based around online learning and what it technically is and is not. A statute currently states that they are only to approve independent study for the GI Bill if it is at accredited degree programs, and a different regulation states that physically being in a classroom is classified as resident, and not being in a classroom is independent study. The new proposed regulation redefines these terms to be more accurate to the current population of students utilizing the GI Bill.

Mr. Alphonso shared the terms that are going to be defined within this regulation: independent study, standard curriculum, distance learning, and resident training. After the regulation is passed, there would be online programs that are not at an accredited degree institution that would still be approvable for the GI Bill because it would not be seen as independent study. Independent study fits into the statuary limit, but the overarching rule that is currently in place which says everything online counts as independent study will no longer be followed. SAAs would review the actual structure of a course before it is approved or denied. They would check to see if it has the correct content, is consistent with quality, has sufficient instructor oversight, and that it reaches a vocational education objective. It would be in the SAA's hands to decide which type of program it is and whether or not to approve it, instead of them being held back by the old rules.

David Salgado, Director of Veterans Education, asked if there would be a distinction in the proposed regulation between accredited and non-accredited for online learning, or if it isn't going to make a difference. Mr. Alphonso answered that it would not make a difference unless the SAA declares it as independent study. Then accredited versus nonaccredited becomes important because the independent study can only be approved at an accredited degree program.

Keith Hauk, Vice Chair; Associate Vice President, Stateside Military Operations, University of Maryland College (UMGC) asked if once a determination is made that the process can move forward with a nonaccredited institution, if it then is the SAA's determination to approve or not whether it can be offered online. Mr. Alphonso affirmed this. Vice Chair Hauk then asked if an NCD provider is a multistate institution, if it is their SAA of record in their state which is the SAA of jurisdiction which makes the final determination. Mr. Alphonso affirmed this as well.

With no further questions, Mr. Alphonso moved on to speaking about a legislative proposal which was included recently in the President's budget for FY24 that focuses on consolidating all of the education benefits into one program: 30, 33, 1606, Chapter 32. He shared how DEA (Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance) is the biggest program with the most beneficiaries and largest dollar amount, so it would be hard to move. They're going to keep the same eligibility standards but how many months of education they receive and what the delimiting date for ages are will change. The main point being that the start date for eligibility starts the day you get the determination, and you never age out of it.

Sue Hoppin, President and Founder of National Military Spouse Network, asked in the chat how this will affect transferability requirements, and if all of the service branches will align their requirements. Mr. Alphonso shared that the transfer is unaffected, and that this proposal is separate. Ms. Hoppin also asked if the changes applied to transferability requirements for Post-9/11 GI Bill, and Mr. Alphonso answered that no, there would be no changes for transfers or requirements.

Vice Chair Hauk asked if the benefits would remain the same, and Mr. Alphonso said it would be the Post-9/11 benefit, but the same as if you're a service member who served under a year, or between 12 and 18 months.

Mr. Alphonso continued to his next slide, concerning MGIB (Montgomery GI Bill) and how it works. He shared it's the same eligibility; you have a six year contract and have to stay active. It will be changed to Post-9/11 GI Bill and benefits will increase annually based on the tuition index. The new rules would just convert everyone over and would not pay anybody less than what they were already being paid for tuition assistance through MGIB.

He moved on to his last slide, involving the money the VA has been holding which was contributed by Veterans in the past for education benefits, but those benefits were not used. As they have not been used, the money they contributed is still being held. Mr. Alphonso explained how they'd been working for years on looking at comp records, hospital records, IRS, anybody who could help them find the people that the money belonged to so they could contact them. The person currently would have to request a refund in order to receive the money, or their surviving spouse or children if they had passed. The new statue would make it easier to just send the refund to the person if they have their information and can do so, which would help get the money back to the original contributors much faster.

Violet Velazquez, Reservist in the U.S. Navy, asked about the Select Reserve GI Bill and why the forever GI Bill does not cover the Reservists. Mr. Alphonso answered that there are currently two distinct and different statutory programs that exist which have different eligibility requirements and different payments, so they have to continue keeping them separate rather than combining them. Ms. Velazquez shared that the current legislation for the Reservist GI Bill specifically regarding service benefits does not reflect the role that Reservists play in today's warfare, as it has changed dramatically over time. She wanted to know who would be in charge of reviewing and changing this for Reservists. Mr. Alphonso said the National Guard and Department of Defense was working on it.

Mr. Alphonso reviewed how National Guard service for the Post-9/11 GI Bill is defined. He shared that there are seven or eight different statutory qualities to be met, and the VA is not the determining party. The DoD gives VA a code, and if the Veteran disagrees with the code, they have to go to DoD and request to change their records. Ultimately, DoD decides the eligibility for the members of the Reserve and National Guard.

Dr. Cynthia Warrick, President of Stillman College, asked how long the people in the Reserve and National Guard would have the benefit. Mr. Alphonso answered that they would be given accrued time, aggregate time in Post-9/11, that never expires. However, whether there is a delimiting date on the Post-9/11 depending on if the Veteran has been discharged more than 90 days prior to 2015.

Vice Chair Hauk asked if there had been any discussion or consideration around Chapter 31 VR&E (Veteran Readiness and Employment) when it comes to the GI Bill. Mr. Alphonso said they were two different programs and so they're independent of one another. With no further questions, Mr. Maltby introduced the next presenter, Mr. Joshua Lashbrook.

Digital GI Bill Program Briefing – Joshua Lashbrook

Mr. Lashbrook introduced himself as the lead for the Digital GI Bill program and said that he would be going over where the program is at, where it's headed, what has been done, and how they feel it's benefiting the Veterans and their beneficiaries. He began by noting that the program has made some significant progress with rapid releases addressing new legislation, replacing some major legacy systems, and improving Veterans' experience and driving automation implements.

To date, they had completed seven major releases and successfully retired two of the three largest legacy systems, including VA Once and LTS. The last major legacy system to be retired will be the mainframe BDN.

He continued, sharing that they have streamlined the process of applying for Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits on VA.gov for eligible Veterans and service members. With the successful deployment of Enrollment Manager, the system that replaced VA Once, they have streamlined the process for schools to submit student enrollments with the new user interface and intuitive designs, using that human-centered design method for creation.

Their new GI Bill chatbot called Billy is a 24/7 self-service tool to provide quick access to information and answers to questions as users become acclimated to the new Enrollment manager. In the future, they are looking forward to deploying the Approval Manager which will replace Wings, and to approve the state approving agencies and VA staff so they can approve new programs for VA educational benefits.

Applicants are now able to review and confirm their prefilled service history, and transfer of entitlement recipients may experience prefilled sponsor data, so they no longer need to enter everything manually. VA is now able to provide Veterans and service members of eligibility decisions within seconds, and provide access to digital copies of their decision letters. On March 6th, Enrollment Manager opened to the school certifying officials, providing an improved process to certify and submit enrollments. They have had over 900,000 enrollment certifications for all chapters that have been submitted from 10,000-plus institutions, and 14,000-plus distinct users in the system so far.

Billy, the GI Bill Chatbot, provides School Certifying Officials (SCOs) live support, answering key questions and providing excellent customer service. It is constantly being improved to help answer more questions and meet the SCO's needs as they acclimate to the new system.

Mr. Lashbrook shared that they are currently developing Approval Manager, where education staff can approve new programs for education benefits. They are using a human-centered design approach, building the system with direct end user input to help make the new system best fit the needs of the end users. Approval Manager will streamline processes, improve the user interface, and speak directly with the other microservices developed so far within the GI Bill managed service.

He moved on to his last topic, sharing that they have made significant progress in improving claims automation including automating original claims for the first time in education's history and are achieving record-breaking automation grades for education service. Mr. Lashbrook then opened the floor to questions.

Vice Chair Hauk asked what the timeline for Approval Manager would be. Mr. Lashbrook answered that they are currently roughly three years into the program, and are taking a strategic look at what problems need to be solved and in what way. Once that is decided, they would develop a new timeline, but they are currently still working on the requirements and development in the background.

With no further presentation from Mr. Lashbrook and no questions, the Committee took a 10 minute break until the next speaker began.

Member Introductions

Each Committee member briefly introduced themselves.

Chair Dexter then thanked everyone for attending and asked Dr. Barry Butler, President of Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, to share updates for the subcommittee on distance learning, which he was head of.

Distance Learning Subcommittee Update

Dr. Butler began by explaining that he would be giving a summary of each of the core issues the subcommittee had been discussing, with pauses after each one for questions. The first issue he shared was that of different types of delivery modalities for education, which had also been discussed in earlier presentations. He shared that the traditional 15 week long semester is changing, and times to completion have changed significantly since the current benefit reimbursement rules were established. In addition, the value of non-degree credentials and things like certifications and certificates is real, as demonstrated by job postings focused on skills as opposed to degrees. The subcommittee feels that it's timely to review current reimbursement rules against today's range of educational opportunities available for Veterans with the goal of permitting the Veteran to apply the full value of their benefits to their programs of study and at a rate appropriate to their persistence, i.e. are they working and taking one course at a time, or are they a full time student?

Dr. Warrick asked if a person who already has a degree would be qualified for additional courses for certification, or if it's only available to people who do not already have a degree. Dr. Butler didn't know the answer but thinks it is going to be based on how the language is interpreted in the laws. However, it's not like DoD tuition assistance where if you already have a degree, you will not pay for accrual of degree. VA is funded and as long as you have benefits, you use the benefits with whatever programs you want to pursue. Dr. Butler also noted there is data that shows if you had a Bachelor's degree in a certain area and you add on top of that a certificate of a certain type, the value of your earning potential goes up significantly in certain areas.

Dr. Butler shared that the subcommittee's idea for the previous issue discussed would be to ask the VA to start looking and doing analysis of what the current enrollment trends and usage benefits are. However, he felt that from the presentations earlier in the day, the VA is already doing a lot of that research, and so they feel it's going in the right direction and may not need to make it an actual issue that is turned into a recommendation.

Dr. Haynie suggested that as progress moves forward, the subcommittee pivots in terms of how it gives a proposed change and asking for data on where the VA is in their progress. Vice Chair Hauk suggested VA look into how the rules change and does it draw additional participants, institutions, organizations into that non-accredited delivery space for education? Chair Dexter concurred and added that another question would be how it brings in more industry-specific credentials and the training provided by industry to the non-accredited space.

Mr. Salgado suggested they wait and see what progress will be made, as it sounded like it would be at least six months before any changes go through. He felt that if it was passed, they probably wouldn't want to look at it for data analysis for at least a year since most of the credentials being discussed are probably shorter than a year to obtain. Dr. Butler agreed with Mr. Salgado's point.

Dr. Butler moved on to the second issue the subcommittee wanted to discuss, involving housing costs versus what the VA supplies for living expenses if a student were living on campus. He argued that Veterans who are completing courses online have the same housing needs as those who are completing them in person. He suggested they ask for data on what the true costs of housing are versus what the Veterans are getting from their education benefits. He then opened the floor for questions.

Ms. Velazquez shared how important she felt this topic is in regards to the success of current Veterans who are pursuing higher education or certificates. She said if your home base isn't secure, you can't focus on anything else, and these are basic needs of an individual. She felt it was important to figure out what the baseline is and where the information was coming from and how the information was being interpreted. Vice Chair Hauk agreed.

Dr. Warrick asked about an online database discussed in a previous meeting which could give a rate for housing reimbursement for education depending on where the person is based on costs of living. Vice Chair Hauk said that is available through the VA website through the GI Bill Comparison tool. He shared that online students are paid half of the national average in housing costs, instead of the benefit being based on their actual location. Mr. Salgado shared that Congress is working on a legislative change in code that changes the reimbursement costs they were speaking of.

Dr. Warrick also asked if the cost of Internet in the Veteran's area is taken into account when determining their benefits. Mr. Salgado answered that no, the law is they pay what they pay and that's it.

Chair Dexter asked if the Committee felt they were at a point of discussion with this recommendation where they need to decide exactly which data they would be requesting from the VA. Vice Chair Hauk and Dr. Butler concurred.

Dr. Butler continued to the next topic the subcommittee wanted to bring up. He asked what the level of training is going on within VA for education benefits and if it could improve the overall efficiency with additional or different training. Chair Hauk shared that he has gotten feedback from some of his SCOs on how helpful the 1-800-GIBILL number had been for them. Dr. Haynie reminded the Committee about Billy the chatbot which they just learned about, and how it wasn't in use at the time they last had the discussion about the training.

Vice Chair Hauk suggested they ask for feedback data from Billy, as his organization uses a chatbot and gets data from students about whether or not their questions were answered. Chair Dexter agreed and pointed out how prevalent AI is becoming for the first line of customer service for many companies and organizations.

Ms. Caitlin Goodale-Porter, a member of the public, asked if she could provide some feedback. She shared that she is the parent of three college students and have not had any AI issues with the GI Bill hotline. In her experience, the calls had been handled by people and not an AI, but she did note problems as far as accuracy of the information being given.

Ms. Hoppin wondered if the VA is already tracking, or could track, when people are leaving the chatbot. Is it once they get their answer, or do they leave after only a few clicks and get frustrated? Dr. Butler shared that what used to drive a lot of the calls to the hotline was there not being enough information in the system for SCOs to be able to help Veterans. Now that the new system has all that information, many of the calls may not happen in the first place as people find the answers more quickly through the chatbot. He also suggested they look at if the nature of the inquiries being made for information is changing.

Vice Chair Hauk shared that the information now available in Enrollment Manager allows SCOs a better understanding about what the Veteran looks like in terms of VA, remaining entitlement, how much they have used, et cetera. He agreed that it would be helpful to understand, based on trends and what the data looks like, if VA is changing how they train their agents at the call center or not.

Chair Dexter returned to the original discussion point about wanting more data on the training process and the curriculum for the support agents, such as if there is any sort of accountability for giving wrong information or if there is more in-depth training being given.

Ms. Velazquez suggested that not only should they ask for the data, but also how they can hold the systems accountable to ensure they're minimizing the level of mistakes happening with Veterans looking for information on their education benefits. Chair Mona said they should look at starting with understanding the training process itself is, first. Dr. Butler agreed. Mr. Maltby shared that from a data standpoint, data does exist even just on the student side for how many calls there are, how many disconnect before they speak to an agent, how long the call time is, et cetera.

Ms. Hoppin agreed with Ms. Velazquez's suggestion of figuring out what it looks like when mistakes are made and how the process is improved. Dr. Butler agreed as well.

Chair Dexter asked if they should then shift to asking for a report on customer experience and NPS (net promoter score) if it exists so they can see trends and go from there. Dr. Butler concurred.

Vice Chair Hauk suggested it would be helpful to understand what the impact has been of Billy and the changes in Enrollment Manager in terms of flow, and what inquiries look like against the previous baseline. He feels that would start to drive a training discussion about, if these changes were made in Enrollment Manager and they have the AI and chatbot but the types of calls the call centers are receiving have changed to a new set of issues. Mr. Maltby noted, as a procedural matter, that they could put together one actual formal recommendation to request what data exists or a briefing on a topic, and that he was making a list of the items being mentioned to see if they can be integrated into the subcommittee meetings or the fall meeting as part of the normal schedule.

The last topic Dr. Butler shared that the subcommittee wanted to discuss was what the timeline for making changes in laws and procedures looked like, in terms of if it allows students and SCOs to plan accordingly for those changes and understand how the changes would be impacting their benefits.

Chair Dexter suggested they were essentially asking for the communications plan, both internal and external of the education benefits. Dr. Butler agreed. Chair Dexter asked if it would be for every time there was a change of any size in the plan. Dr. Butler agreed. With no further discussion on the topic and no other points the subcommittee wanted to bring up, Dr. Butler yielded the floor.

Open Discussion

Chair Dexter thanked Dr. Butler and reviewed the next day's agenda. She then opened the floor for open discussion.

Vice Chair Hauk asked if the Committee had a designated member from the Department of Defense. Mr. Maltby said they did not, and that the two ex officio members of the Committee are the Assistant Secretary and Post-Secretary of Education of the Department of Education, and the Assistant Secretary for the Veterans Employment and Training Service at Department of Labor.

Vice Chair Hauk asked if it was within their purview to make a recommendation about membership, and Mr. Maltby said they could not. He suggested they instead request briefings from the DoD or invite them as guests to their meetings, if they have a specific person in mind.

Ms. Velazquez shared she had been serving as a Reservist in the Navy for 12 years and has seen retention and recruitment fall dramatically in that time. She felt it was an important aspect to take a look at the fact that Reservists, National Guard, and other entities of the DoD are starting to play a bigger picture in the war front because of retention issues across the board. Vice Chair Hauk agreed that they should be looking at bringing in the DoD in some way to the discussion. Dr. Warrick also concurred.

Chair Dexter asked if there were other comments or open mic items to be discussed. With none being voiced, she moved on to public comments.

Public Comments

Ms. Goodale-Porter thanked the Committee for the opportunity to be there to speak. She shared that she had other issues she would discuss on other days that tie into recruiting and retention as well as the 1-800 number they had discussed earlier. She emphasized her concern about the deflection that happens at the 1-800-GIBILL number, and how she believed she had been lied to a couple of times with misinformation through people at the call center. She shared her experience with adopting a nephew and only getting bad answers when she called a VA number, being told they could not adopt anyone over the age of 18. Ms. Goodale-Porter knew this was false because she had VA material and 38 CFR code that specifically says you can.

She shared that this process impacted her nephew's education for college and because of the resistance of the use of educational benefits for him was only a quarter of what he should have received based on the guidelines of Chapter 35 and both parents having over 50 years in uniform between them. She again emphasized how this process was only made harder due to the amount of misinformation she was given the many times she called the call center about benefits.

Ms. Goodale-Porter went on to explain how she had been denied at least five times for VR&E, Chapter 31, being told that she already has a degree so they won't send her to law school, then that they wouldn't help with the education to get licensed in the state her husband was stationed, to being told in 2016 that her husband could take care of her. In 2022, she was told since her kids were using Chapter 35, they could put her application forward, but her kids might lose their benefits, so she stopped pursuing that avenue again. She then thanked the Committee and said she'd be back the next day and would like to be a part of the process they are creating.

Open Discussion

Mr. Maltby commented that it strikes him how some of the feedback from Ms. Goodale-Porter ties into the discussion around getting more information about how the call center processes work, how they're going to be improved, and how people are trained. He said it's consistent with other feedback he's heard and that it's a known problem. Vice Chair Hauk agreed and shared that in his professional experience, what he has found is training is one way to address the issue and potentially mitigate some of the effects discussed.

Adjourn

Chair Dexter thanked everyone for their time and participation, reminding them that the next day's meeting begins at 9:00 a.m. She then adjourned the meeting at 4:36 p.m.

Tuesday, June 6, 2023

Roll Call

Mr. Maltby called the roll and determined that a quorum was present.

Opening Remarks

Chair Dexter thanked everybody for attending day two of their meeting and expressed her appreciation for everybody's hard work in the subcommittees, as well as appreciating the time of those of the public who were also attending. Vice Chair Hauk concurred and added that it was great to have everybody back together in person for a meeting again.

Chair Dexter then introduced the first presenter of the day who was also a Committee member, Sarah Roberts, prior lead of Military and Veteran programs at LinkedIn.

LinkedIn Presentation – Sarah Roberts

Ms. Roberts introduced herself and explained she would be anchoring the conversation mainly around skills, as the data they've leveraged in the past has had some impact on their team. She shared that the work they've done in the Veteran space is a few years obsolete, so she didn't feel that a refresh of that data would give an accurate representation of what they are seeing evolve across the workforce.

She emphasized LinkedIn's mission to connect members with opportunities. They are able to work with an economic graph and economists who understand the trends across the global workforce. Many people are leaving teams or pivoting and moving into new roles, and LinkedIn is seeing a unique transition to skills-based hiring. Ms. Roberts also spoke about the power of community and how they are thinking about the future of work and investing in that skills development piece as they think about the transition from solely focusing on degrees to opening up to more skills-based hiring.

Ms. Roberts shared some stats about how employers are leveraging skills as part of their writing of job descriptions when they're thinking about how they vet future employees and onboard members. They're thinking through how they can open up that access to opportunity and leverage skills in that talent ecosystem. LinkedIn is also looking at VA from the perspective of helping people craft job descriptions or email messages to the network to send to either recruiters to candidates or candidates to recruiters.

She showed a quick demo of a paid product a customer would pay for if they want to understand global trends, to help them infer business decisions, if they're opening up a new site, or upskilling their employees, or want to explore and open a new business venture opportunity and need to understand the skills of their current employees and what they need to hire for. She explained how it shows a company report and you can filter talent pools that will help you get more granular. The user can also see where the talent that they are looking for sits, and what companies are hiring that type of talent.

Ms. Roberts shared how LinkedIn Learning is being used to learn how to address and understand skills gaps and opportunities that exist to close those gaps. It helps to see where employers are hiring and where they're going so that if a person with a degree needs to upskill in a particular area in order to be competitive for a specific job at the company they are reviewing, they would be able to learn what those skills are that they need to obtain.

Recruiter is the third product within their talent marketplace (with insights and learning being the first two). This tool is used by recruiters within companies to explore external talent and leverage talent insight and skills in order to find those candidates. She then shared her screen and showed a quick demo of the data at LinkedIn and how talent pools can be generated, using D.C. as an example location for the search.

Ms. Roberts discussed the ability of LinkedIn to identify military Veterans on their platform through their recruiter tool if they are searching for Veterans or someone with military affiliation for their company. The tool can also identify military spouses if that is included on the spouse's LinkedIn profile. LinkedIn also has open-source tools that can be used to identify many different data types that recruiters or talent are searching for. They can look at gender gaps, employment gaps, and where talent is coming in and going out in different areas.

She emphasized that the biggest piece she wanted to spotlight is the ability they have to understand the workforce in many different ways. She also shared they will be doing a refresh of the Veteran Opportunity Report fall of '23 to see what has changed in the workforce specifically for Veterans in the past four years. She then opened the floor for questions.

Ms. Hoppin asked if opening the aperture for different categories includes more of the trades, and if so, how granular are they going in terms of the different trades that are available? Ms. Roberts answered that they anchor their data on core industries, so they aren't specifically pulling in particular trades. Their insights tie back to the particular industry that the data was from.

Ms. Hoppin then asked if there is a Veteran who is transitioning from a transportation background but is moving into a bricklayer or some other types of job, how would LinkedIn capture that? Would it default to where the Veteran came from, or would there be space for them to be found through their new skills? Ms. Roberts said that

that's the beauty of the skills-based search criteria, that the new skills can be woven into the person's profile so that if an organization or recruiter are searching by skills, they will see that individual. However, if the organization or recruiter are searching by job title, they would be less likely to find that particular individual.

Ms. Hoppin commented that if military spouses have to self-identify within LinkedIn to be found, she felt that military spouses would never self-identify as such unless LinkedIn defines what military spouse means to them. Ms. Roberts shared that there are two mechanisms in which they are able to identify military spouses. She said there is an option when you initially create your LinkedIn profile and that there is some specificity in terms of the definition. They had not seen any huge uptick in spouses self identifying and that has impacted their data, so they also give LinkedIn premium to all military spouses for one year and they can leverage it multiple times. LinkedIn has batch codes so they can be identified on the back end as military spouses and can more fully understand their employment journey.

Dr. Butler shared that sometimes a skill can be something that is taken from a job title a person had, and asked if that is captured in terms of credentialing versus self-identified skills? Ms. Roberts said that when a member identifies the skills they have, it's more of an "on your honor" piece of trusting the person to list the skills they gained from experience. If the member is looking at a job that has skills they need, they can then focus on upskilling programs offered through industry or organizations.

She shared they also anchor on LinkedIn Learning because they can see if somebody has completed a LinkedIn learning track with designated learning paths. At the end of that learning track, there is an exam and upon successful completion the member can add that skill and completion of certification to their LinkedIn profile. However, this only applies if the member obtains the certification through LinkedIn and that they can't verify those that are obtained externally.

Ms. Roberts emphasized how LinkedIn is trying to better break down the stigma that you have to have a certain level of credentialing in order to make a competent, qualified, successful employee.

Dr. Butler asked, from the recruiter or employer perspective, when they're looking to do what Ms. Roberts demonstrated earlier with finding job seekers, do they predominantly look for titles and experience of the respective candidates or a credential in the specific job they're looking to fill, or both? Ms. Roberts answered that it's up to the recruiters or other professionals doing the search. Dr. Butler commented that even though the data is old, the data Ms. Roberts mentioned on Veterans could still be important for the Committee to view.

Mr. Quintas thanked Ms. Roberts for the presentation and shared his perspective on how they're trying to think through the value of the benefit of skills-based hiring and ensuring that beneficiaries are getting the maximum value of the benefit. He also felt that older data may not be very useful to the Committee with how much the world has changed in the last four years with the impact of COVID and recent trends in tech hiring. Mr. Quintas also shared that there is a very strong trend that companies are doing assessments either at entry or during the interview process to validate the skills the candidate has on their resume.

Jared Lyon, President and CEO of Student Veterans of America (SVA) asked Ms. Roberts for clarification on if skill-based data is helpful, as it isn't a title or pedigree or soft skills, but non-credentialed stuff. Ms. Roberts agreed and said it's leveraging sort of a holistic candidate such as a customer service candidate who has skills they've obtained on the job, but what is the transferability of those skills to a new job, industry, or market?

Mr. Lyon stressed the importance of skills-based assessments towards things like removing bias, or to equity-related conversations, to explaining gaps in employment history for any number of reasons. He said it's important for the Committee to understand the Veterans and their families as adult learners as well.

Chair Dexter thanked Mr. Lyon and shared that in terms of non-traditional learning, there is a broad spectrum of learners including some who need basic digital literacy to be able to learn at the current rate with leveraging the current methods.

Ms. Goodale-Porter shared that she is not a digital native and has a serious employment handicap which she didn't realize would affect her until she began taking law classes. Because of her handicap, it's been hard to work with computers and she has been given low-vision computers by the VA. She emphasized that even though she is older and not thought of in terms of education benefits, she is still eligible for those services and is not a digital native.

Mr. Lyon thanked Ms. Goodale-Porter and shared that the scope of the Committee has to fall within the statute as written and existing and are not able to influence statute. He said he was speaking from the vantage point of what the Committee has as current rules are written, but not speaking to the inequities that exist in the rules.

Ms. Velazquez asked Ms. Roberts whether LinkedIn may do a deeper dive into Guard and Reserve skills transferability as they look at those who are dual-career and potentially building different careers but with a lot of transferability. Ms. Roberts answered that the people who do leverage LinkedIn are the demographic that still skews more towards what would be defined as professional, so there is a gap in terms of the type of skills Guard or Reserve members would have.

Vice Chair Hauk shared that DoD pushes every service member as they transition out of the military to get LinkedIn, so he thinks the ability to create a richer potential data set around skilled trades, OJTs, or apprenticeships would be very helpful. He also asked if a recommendation set that a LinkedIn user sees is based off the information that the user puts on their profile. Ms. Roberts affirmed that that is the case, and all the inputs on the profile are playing a role.

Chair Dexter asked if there was anything they could do to see what the trends of usage are for the demographic that may have not updated that they transitioned from the military and went into an apprenticeship program, but then updating they're in a job after the program. Ms. Roberts said there are a couple of points, but mostly a person's profile is only as good as the person makes it and the information they share.

Ms. Renick from Vets at DoL asked if everyone was familiar with the DoD MilGears program which is open to service members, Veterans, military spouses, and others, and takes their learning records and other skills and matches it to occupations and highlights skills needed in industry sectors. Mr. Lyon suggested that could be a good presentation to the Committee in the future.

With no further questions specifically for Ms. Roberts, Chair Dexter suggested the Committee take an early break for lunch. The Committee agreed.

Trade Unions Subcommittee Discussion – Darrell Roberts

Chair Dexter asked Darrell Roberts, Director of Organizing, International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART), head of the Trade Unions Subcommittee, to give an update on what the subcommittee has been working on.

Mr. Roberts began by sharing the subcommittee's work on the tired funding of the OJT (On the Job Training) payment. The tiered payout is where the Veteran receives 100 percent of monthly housing stipend for the first six months of training, 80 percent for the second six months of training, 60 percent, 40 percent, and 20 percent for the remainder of the training. They are reviewing this data in conjunction with billing trade unions which have about 60 percent of all registered apprenticeships in the United States, and of those, 74 percent are trained by joint labor management programs and apprenticeship programs.

In 2022, there were 281,592 registered apprenticeships in the billing trade unions, apprenticeships throughout the United States, and they collectively spent about $2 billion on their training of private money. Some of the priorities for the billing trades is the reauthorization of the National Apprenticeship Act of 1937, and it would put the apprenticeship projects currently in regulation and statute to law, and it would make the registered apprenticeship program more stable, instead of having to put changes by the administrations when they come in.

He shared that they're also looking for greater diversity in the national apprenticeship program, especially in construction, as the billing trades and other contractors compete for new infrastructure and manufacturing projects. Assessment of skills is also a huge piece for the subcommittee. Some of the pieces that the team is working specifically on is they have asked themselves about the consistency and frequency of training for standard approving agencies. Specifically, what is the funding and salaries around those? How do we look at that? How do we expose whether or not we're keeping the most qualified personnel to be at these state approving agencies? How do we work with those individuals or work with them to see what we can get done, whether it's a survey by the VA on how many people are leaving, what's the turnover rate for those individuals?

Mr. Roberts explained that they are also looking at streamlining processes. The subcommittee are reviewing some processes and determining where, if any, of those can be streamlined to assist. They are also discussing the ability for the VA to have more autonomy over their funding. He suggested a recommendation could be based around what happens to the money that did not get used for a program that still has funding at the end of the federal fiscal year? Does the VA get to keep those funds, or does it go back to Congress? Mr. Roberts asked if any of his subcommittee members had anything to add.

Ms. Hoppin said the reason to review the data about funding is more to show usage rate and so the public can see that it isn't VA's fault if one area or another didn't get enough funding if the VA is not allowed to move excess money around at the end of the fiscal year.

Mr. Salgado used the examples of VRRAP (Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program) and VET TEC, where VRRAP was not as successful as expected and VET TEC was successful, so there was a lot of money left in VRRAP where VET TEC appeared to be out of funding by the third quarter of the federal fiscal year. He felt that the part that gets left out when speaking about the holistic aspect of Veterans being in jobs and going to school and trying to get certifications, is the part that comes down to apprenticeships and OJTs. Once those in the trades are older and are unable to do the physical work, they may want to get more training to do another type of job. By that point they may not have GI benefits anymore, but there are other programs to assist them, and Mr. Salgado wants to make sure those programs are funded appropriately.

Mr. Roberts added that the subcommittee had worked on putting together a potential presentation for anybody who wants to attend to actually physically go to a training center for apprenticeship. They would ask the various trades to do presentations or set up booths as if they were going to be at a military base so that the Committee can get an idea of what each of the trades are offering.

Mr. Salgado brought up another topic they have talked about in the subcommittee, communication. They understand the OJT apprenticeship space, specifically for Veteran spouses, is underutilized. He looked up all of the places that he would need to look to find information to figure out whether or not a particular apprenticeship program is approved in a particular state, and he had to go to around 50 different places to find that information. The subcommittee wants to find a way to connect all the different areas of information into a one-stop shop for individuals to easily find what they are looking for.

Chair Dexter told the subcommittee that part of the discussion when they think about drafting the recommendations would be how to bring down the goals into actionable steps that can be put forward, and what are the different purposes?

Ms. Renick commented that the apprenticeship.gov website includes information on investments, grants, contracts, and other funding opportunities. Mr. Salgado agreed that the link is a great link, but looking at it from their Committee standpoint, they could do better for their Veterans, especially in the OJT apprenticeship space, to give them the understanding and the knowledge of what they need in order to reach their goals.

Ms. Renick shared that the MilGear website is one that has evolved over the last few years and the Department of Labor is trying to encourage Veterans and transitioning service members to go to the site. They could put in information from their learning record, and the site would walk them through different opportunities that align with their skill sets, or will give them recommendations to upskill in terms of credentialing. She said they are also working on creating a webpage for Veterans and other employers to come to, DoLVets.gov, to find more information about apprenticeships. The third item she wanted to highlight was that in the FY23 omnibus legislation, there was a directive for the Department of Labor Vets office to work with the VA to create a Veteran friendly apprenticeship webpage and that has been in progress over the past two months.

Chair Dexter paused the conversation about the Trade Unions Subcommittee so the next speaker, James Ruhlman, Deputy Director for Program Management in Education Service, could begin his presentation.

Education Service Presentation

Mr. Ruhlman introduced himself, sharing that he also oversees the oversight and accountability division which conducts compliance services and enforcement activities. He reminded the Committee that they had asked him to present at their meeting about legislation 8515 and the recent changes to it that would specifically pertain to the work the Committee does. He began by giving a brief overview of 8515, that it has a long history as a market validation tool, ensuring that schools generally could have some students enroll without the need for aid and assistance from the GI Bill benefit programs.

The Ensuring Best Schools for Veterans Act of 2022 made additional changes to 8515 requirements that are important and have large impacts, especially on accredited schools. 8515 is no longer applicable to accredited schools with a 35 percent exemption, so if no more than 35 percent of the enrolled student population is made up of GI Bill beneficiaries, the 8515 does not apply. It is also exempted any program with fewer than 10 supported students, either supported by GI Bill benefits or by the institution itself.

He went on to explain that 8515 does still apply to nonaccredited schools. The 35 percent exemption works basically the way it did before the new legislation, and that is they are exempt from the normal standard of quarterly or semester based reporting requirements. However, they can still be asked to report if Education Service has reason to believe that a program may be noncompliant. Schools do have to submit a request for the exemption every two years, and then the reporting requirements remain unchanged for those schools without a 35 percent exemption, so schools with a total student population for which at least 35 percent are GI Bill beneficiaries, nothing has changed for them.

Mr. Ruhlman shared some data on both 35 percent exemptions and the amount of schools they're still waiting on reports from. The data is from June 1, 2023, so a week old as of the date of the meeting. They had processed 5,257 35 percent of reporting exemptions. 4,769 were for accredited institutions, and so were exempt from 8515. Non-accredited institutions only make up 488 of that total population because it doesn't exempt them from anything other than the standard reporting requirements. There are still have 2,606 institutions who have either not provided them with a statement of assurance that they're complying with 8515, or in 35 percent exemption requests. His team has been reaching out to those schools through their education liaison representatives, asking them to please submit a 35 percent exemption if they think they need it, and he thinks most of them do need to. He feels that 8515 overall is going very well.

He moved on to the next topic, staffing, because they were flooded with 35 percent exemption requests after the Best Schools for Veterans Act was initially passed. They had to dedicate a lot of resources both from their education liaison representatives as well as their compliance survey specialists in order to process those requests. At this time, the extra requests are not an issue because the processing of each form is now taking under two weeks and are not seen as a priority to hire for because they aren't receiving as many as they used to.

For staffing and recruitment, Mr. Ruhlman shared that they have only three vacancies among education liaison representatives (ELRs) for a 96 percent fill rate. They have two education component survey specialist (ECSS) vacancies for a 97 percent fill rate. For supervisor compliance and liaison specialists, they have two vacancies for an 88 percent fill rate. He assured the Committee that they are actively working to fill all vacancies. For timeliness of reviewing approval packages, they are seeing from their state approval agency partners that they are at about 27.6 days, so under 30 days, which is good. He said the compliance survey numbers are looking good as well, and they are on track to meet the statutory requirements. They are over halfway of where they expected to be, and have done 1,700 compliance activities so far in 2023, generally doing about 3,200 a year.

Mr. Salgado asked if the numbers were only for VA or if St. George Consulting was included in the metrics. Mr. Ruhlman confirmed that they are only for VA personnel. He shared that they are getting ready to potentially exercise another option with St. George Consulting, expanding the portfolio of types of programs they're looking into as they proceed. His team has done quality and compliance surveys and is keeping track of that as a contract deliverable.

Vice Chair Hauk asked if they had reviewed what drove the staffing problems, if it was a function of COVID or an issue of finding qualified applicants with the right skill sets. Mr. Ruhlman said that COVID definitely played a part, as a lot of positions they opened up during the pandemic were virtual.

Mr. Ruhlman continued his presentation, sharing that year to date, ELRs have completed over 18,500 approval packages that they reviewed. The current pending workload is 478 approval packages. They did also change organizationally from using paper approval packages from the SAAs to allowing them to be submitted electronically, which allows them to divide the work among regions instead of having to have the SAA mail the approval package to the ELR in the state they are in.

He shared more statistics, including completing 1,726 compliance surveys; uncovered 2,661 payment errors; identified a little under a million dollars in benefits underpayments and $6 million in overpayments; and their year-to-date average for completion of a compliance survey is 17.38 days which is well below the target.

Mr. Ruhlman moved on to speaking about risk-based surveys (RBS), which has been in statute for many years and has evolved over time. The Harry W. Comber Act was the one that first made changes to mention this concept of a risk-based survey. It did talk about using SAAs for conducting both compliance surveys and risk-based surveys, which is something that they have been talking with the state approving agencies for quite a while, really trying to focus more of their oversight on problem schools rather than just those with 20 or more students.

Second is the Isakson and Roe Act, which set forth some specific requirements for the scope of risk-based surveys. It allows them, in collaboration with the state approving agencies, to add some steps to it, and develop and flesh out the processes for the performance of those surveys. It also provided them with a number of specific triggers that can cause the need for the performance of a risk-based survey. Those are spelled out in 38 USC 3673, Subsection D, entitled Notice of Government Action.

He emphasized that, as with every other compliance activity, it's designed to make sure the programs at the schools are offering value to the Veterans, service members, and dependents, as well as making sure they meet all of the approval requirements for GI Bill benefits. For onsite reviews at schools, they are looking for a number of factors including identifying and mitigating any sort of fraud, waste, or abuse, or any other issues which may prevent Veterans from wasting their benefits on a program that doesn't have value, or where the credits wouldn't transfer.

The SAAs are looking at financial stability, which is an approval requirement for non-accredited schools. They also review some of the certifications the schools have to make sure the payments of benefits are accurate, and ensuring prompt action if any of the risk factors are substantiated, providing remediation and program suspension if needed.

Mr. Ruhlman pointed out how many of the risk factors mentioned are spelled out in statute and outline the scope of what they're looking at as far as things they consider important as they look at selecting schools for a risk-based survey outside of those notices of government action. They look for rapid increase in the GI Bill student population, rapid tuition and fee payment increase, volume of validated student complaints that we receive through our GI Bill feedback tool, and also the severity of those complaints.

He moved on to speaking about Veteran completion rates, where they need to figure out what they are versus the non-Veteran completion rates. They are also looking at establishing the Veteran outcome measures they have been working on for several years. For the rollout, they set the thresholds pretty low, and they're in the early stages of looking at some of the results of the RBSs to try and figure out how they want to tweak it. They want to be sure they are dedicating additional resources to the schools that need help the most, not the ones who don't need it at all.

A new requirement also established by Isakson and Roe requires the certification of enrollment at the beginning of the term, and then again after the end of the drop out period, even if there is no charge. Mr. Ruhlman said that one of the more interesting findings so far is that 19 facilities had their approval withdrawn following the performance of an RBS. 13 facilities requested to have their approval for benefits withdrawn because they were asked to provide information for a risk-based survey. The statutory program does require SAAs to withdraw program approval for a facility that does not provide the information requested in furtherance of an RBS.

Dr. Butler asked how the risk factor of financial stability was determined. Mr. Ruhlman said it's something they're working on because they're new to it, and there's really no general broad agreement on how it is defined. So they are continuing to look at other agencies and talking with agencies like the Department of Education and reaching out to accreditors to see how these agencies measure financial stability as a risk factor.

Mr. Salgado shared that there are forms that SAAs fill out for financial stability that was created between the VA and SAAs in terms of financial soundness. They only use the forms as an indicator. He said that in each state, depending on how they do their financial soundness reviews, will take that information and either says it's good or will flag it. At that point, the SAAs will put it through their own process. He emphasized that how SAAs handle the process differs from state to state, as some of what they do is based in state statutory regulations.

He also shared that they have statutory authority to take action on non-accredited institutions if they are found to not be financially stable. For accredited institutions, they do not have the authority to do so, but they have found that if they are flagging an accredited institution for financial unsoundness, they probably have other issues that fall in the realm of Title 38, or the VA should be taking action.

Vice Chair Hauk shared his experience with going through two RBSs at his institution. He said that what they underwent in Maryland was significantly different than what they did in Virginia because the State Commission on Higher Education (SCHE) in Virginia had a very detailed set of rules as far as financial soundness.

Dr. Haynie said his institution had also gone through an RBS and he was curious on if certain triggers more than others are driving the volume of RBSs. He shared how a student had complained about the definition of full-time status is at the graduate level, and when VA deemed the complaint invalid, the student made the same complaint a second time. Because there were two complaints made within a certain timeframe, this triggered an SAA to complete an RBS.

Mr. Ruhlman answered that at this time, the thresholds are set fairly low and they do not have a priority of which factors are more important. However, they are continuing to evolve the model, though ultimately it is a funding issue.

Dr. Warrick asked how the VA measures graduation rates. Mr. Ruhlman did not know, but Mr. Salgado asked if Dr. Warrick wanted information that comes as a risk factor for the RBS, or just overall in general. Dr. Warrick requested both. Mr. Salgado did not have information on how the RBS rates were, but he did share that it is all public information based on what the institution is reporting to the Department of Education. He said the other area they are focusing on is how non-accredited institutions are not required to report graduation rates depending on the state they are in.

Dr. Warrick shared her experience with working in a small institution, Stillman, which has small sample sizes, and how some people are not in school continuously because of a number of factors. She felt this was not representative of the success or quality of a school. She shared that Stillman’s graduation rate is 20 percent and that it was assumed that means only 20 percent of seniors graduated in May, which is not the case. They don’t include transfer students in the rate, and her school is a high transfer one. Mr. Salgado noted that SAAs do not take action on institutions based on their graduation rates, and it is just a factor to do an RBS to ensure there are no factors that affect Title 38.

Mr. Maltby noted that one of the two ex officio members of the Committee is the Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education, and suggested they may be able to collaborate with him in the confines of a subcommittee or Committee meeting. He also mentioned that there was a discussion the previous day about possible efforts to address MHA disparity and asked Mr. Ruhlman if he had any details.

Mr. Ruhlman said they have had discussions with the Hill about that issue, specifically with regard to the rate for individuals studying solely through distance learning online. It would take a statutory change for that to be addressed, but it is something they have heard about often from the Veteran community.

With no further discussion or questions, Mr. Ruhlman thanked the Committee for their time.

Open Discussion

Dr. Warrick suggested the Department of Labor could work with VA to try to target Veterans to interest them in nontraditional occupations the DoL is having trouble filling and provide them with the certification or degree to do so. Chair Dexter said that from a workforce perspective, the establishment of apprenticeships would be have to be from more of an industry and labor perspective. The VA perspective, as far as their Committee works, should be how they can ensure that the users of the benefits are eligible to use those benefits for apprenticeships across industry.

Ms. Hoppin suggested they need to have more crosstalk with a committee at Department of Labor that deals with apprenticeships, or the Department of Education National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity that they may also be able to speak to.

Ms. Renick reminded the Committee that she is the apprenticeship, licensing, and credentialing lead at DoL VES, and that prior to VES, she was in the National Office of Apprenticeship as the strategic engagement lead. She continued, sharing what they have been doing in the past couple of years to increase awareness about apprenticeship opportunities that are not necessarily in skilled trades. They are trying to get more information to transitioning service members through the DoL TAP (Transition Assistance Program) curriculum and have entered in more information about the values apprenticeship and the earn and learn model. They have also developed a military life cycle training to give to service members earlier in their service career, in addition to developing off base transition training and transition employment military spouse training. She shared they have been incorporating more information about registered apprenticeships and those opportunities that are available that aren't the usual trades that people think of.

Ms. Renick said they are also having talks with DoD about how to develop a registered apprenticeship pipeline to support DoD civilian occupations in cybersecurity. There is also the U.S. MAP (United Services Military Apprenticeship Program) which is the largest registered apprenticeship program available and is for currently serving service members.

Ms. Velasquez asked if there is also a pipeline which incorporates the Reserves and National Guard, sharing that she, as a Reservist, doesn't have access from an administrative level of any of the programs mentioned.

Ms. Renick shared that the registered apprenticeship programs, MilGears program, and Skill Bridge program are available to Reservists. She told Ms. Velazquez that she would take her input back to leadership and see how they can do a better job of getting information to individuals like herself.

Mr. Lyon asked the subcommittee if the biggest challenge they are seeing is the communications and marketing efforts. Ms. Hoppin said they had already spoken about that and do see it as an issue. She felt there are some things within their purview that they can make recommendations on, but many things are outside their scope.

Chair Dexter noted that one of the things she felt everybody showed consensus on in the past two days is that it would be helpful for them to get a briefing on VA communications as it relates to programs and/or updates. She suggested it may help to provide some tools to the subcommittees such as a mapping tool in order to figure out the problem they are trying to solve from the perspective of the subcommittee.

Public Comments

Chair Dexter opened the floor for public comments.

Ms. Goodale-Porter thanked the Committee for the opportunity to share her experience with them. She shared that a big issue she had been working on since December 10, 2021, is Chapter 35 and how it has impacted two Veteran parents within a nuclear family. They have run into issues as dual Veteran families where Chapter 35 enters the picture and are apparently likely to become an issue if a pending GI Bill passes.

She emphasized that there are Veterans overseas who are counting on her to make sure their Committee is aware of the issues they are having overseas with using any of their GI Bill benefits for reasons that are not well-explained to them. She became aware of this issue when she got a phone call letting her know that her husband was about to lose $12,000 because their daughter was using Chapter 35 through her. They found that in a case where both parents are Veterans and both are 100 percent disabled, the benefit ends up being less than a third if they only allow one set of benefits to the child but that takes back statutorily compensation from both Veteran parents.

Ms. Goodale-Porter asked the Committee to be aware that when it comes to the one GI Bill, it needs to be started on a firm foundation where there is understanding of what is happening to every Veteran family. She emphasized the importance of communication when it comes to families with two Veteran parents and children who may want to utilize education benefits. She thanked the Committee again and promised to return for the next day’s meeting.

Adjourn

Chair Dexter thanked Ms. Goodale-Porter for her comments. She reviewed the next day’s agenda and reminded the Committee that their fall meeting would likely be virtual. She asked the Committee to think about their schedules and availability not only for the fall meeting but for April’s meeting, which would be the last in their current cycle.

There being no further business, Chair Dexter adjourned the meeting at 3:47 p.m. EST.

Wednesday, June 7, 2023

Acting Deputy Secretary's Presentation

Chair Dexter welcomed Guy Kiyokawa, Acting Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs and thanked him for speaking to the Committee.

Mr. Kiyokawa shared that his job is usually as the Assistant Secretary for Enterprise Integration, but he has been the Acting Deputy Secretary for over two months at that time. He began by sharing a statistic of how there are over 18 million Veterans in the United States, with over 9 million being connected in some way to VA health care benefits. Over the last 20 years, the world of the National Guard and Reserves has dramatically changed, and the military has spent a lot of time trying to keep up with what the allowed benefits are, as well as the VA. The VA is also focusing on the PACT Act and ensuring everybody who is eligible for benefits applies for them.

He noted that the priorities for the VA currently are mental health and suicide prevention. He shared that the electronic health record is one of the things they've been working hard on so Veterans can be better supported. He shared that the spouse employment issue is close to his heart, and they are working on that as well, where there is a program where spouses can move around and easily find jobs and maintain their careers.

Mr. Kiyokawa acknowledged the work that the Committee is doing and that he appreciated their efforts and great recommendations on modernization and data. He emphasized his support for the work the Committee has been doing and encouraged them to continue with their efforts.

Dr. Butler commented that they had previously focused on the highest level definition of what the current workforce needs, what educational benefits are available to Veterans, and what is the future of education in order to make sure the benefits given to Veterans align with what the workforce needs and what they want. Mr. Kiyokawa agreed that education is important unless you aren't able to get a meaningful job or career. He acknowledged that colleges don't have a responsibility of actually helping graduates get a career once they have graduated. He agrees that it's a challenge they're facing, with helping Veterans and beneficiaries be able to move on to finding work after completing their education.

Chair Dexter expanded on their discussion from the previous day, explaining that they ended the meeting with finding that they are interested in really learning from a business perspective how the VA at large is treating the customer experience component of business, and the communications aspect of business.

Mr. Kiyokawa agreed and thanked Chair Dexter for the comment. He said it goes back to the discussion about data, which really came out of the PACT Act, which had five lines of effort, with two of those being communications and outreach, and data analytics. He agreed with how important communication was, with communication needs and strategies changing with each generation. He also shared that the Secretary has been adamant about being more proactive with these issues.

Mr. Quintas asked if the GI Bill is considered a success, and what they measure to inform their opinion on that. Mr. Kiyokawa was unsure, but he knows they measure things as far as benefits are concerned. He said they might have to ask Veterans what they define success as, and what parts do they need to get to the definition of success? If the GI Bill's sole purpose is to provide education, then it has done that, but if it is to go farther and ensure Veterans have meaningful careers and work, then he did not know at this time.

Ms. Hoppin shared that she felt they should also look at the other side of the data, which is the benefit to the services as a potential retention tool. She felt it would be great to measure the actual efficacy for the services in terms of retention. Mr. Kiyokawa told her that every year, studies of the all-volunteer military show that for the past 20 years, the top one or two reason that people volunteer in the first place is the opportunity for education.

Mr. Kiyokawa shared that he has been pushing to have initiatives pushed forth that are tangible in the short term, so they are not only working on the long-term items. With no further presentation or questions, he took his leave.

Administrative Notes

Mr. Maltby introduced Dr. Nicole Morant, the new Deputy Director for Program Integration. Dr. Morant shared that her dissertation was how to measure success of transitioning Veterans, so she was enjoying the Committee's conversations. Mr. Maltby encouraged her to come back later in the day for a presentation from the Veterans Experience Office.

Roll Call

Mr. Maltby called the roll and determined that a quorum was present.

Modernization Subcommittee Presentation

Mr. Quintas began the presentation by briefly reminding the Committee of the subcommittee's charter. The subcommittee was established to understand how the VA is in position to meet the educational needs of beneficiaries out to the year 2030. They also focused their discovery efforts in three areas, the first being to understand how the VA is prepared to develop future proofing concepts that prepare the Department for changing education needs of millennials and Generation Z. The second is to understand how the VA is prepared to improve outcomes and meet the needs of the future workforce, specifically considering changes in hiring practices, specifically around skill-based hiring. The third is to understand how the VA is prepared to adjust to changes in the conduct of war as it may affect National Guard and Reserve beneficiaries regarding current and future legislative language that defines the benefit.

He began with outcome measurement. The subcommittee feels it is critically important not only that the VA understands and defines what a positive outcome is, or what outcomes they seek to understand, but also that that information is fed back to future beneficiaries and current beneficiaries that are considering how to use it. It's critically important that there is data available to understand the outcome because otherwise there can be a lot of assumptions without data.

Mr. Quintas shared that they are likely going to have some recommendations around how to think about outcome measurements. He feels it's a discussion around, can you measure and understand the benefit and articulate as a contrast between the four-year programs and alternative program options? Throughout the COVID and post-COVID period, there has been a lot of data around technical roles. He feels that network engineering, cloud technology, data security, IT security, cybersecurity, the use of the cloud, and other high-tech demands are very strong trends that should inform the subcommittee and VA how they think about that outcome.

He noted that some of the specific requests they're exploring that should be developed is that the VA should develop a list of personas covering all beneficiary cases. They should develop the persona but also the path of the persona. He used an example of someone who uses it for a four-year degree versus someone who uses it for an apprenticeship versus someone who uses it for a certification. The second would be then for each of the personas to develop a more robust list of outcome measures where the data should be collected. The third is based around thinking beyond some of the basic things that are discussed with the GI Bill.   He feels it should go beyond degree completion, time in program, and whether or not they have a job. It should be based around income potential and lifelong earning potential.

Mr. Quintas paused for questions. Dr. Butler recommended that as the subcommittee looks at the personas and categories, they keep in mind that within those categories the information may also need to be categorized. Mr. Quintas thanked him for his comment.

Ms. Velazquez applauded the fact that the subcommittee was looking at recommendations that would also apply to the Reserve and National Guard, considering the big role the National Guard and Reserve have played within the last five years. She shared that with retention issues with the other services, the Guard and Reserves are stepping up to the plate more and more. Many benefits for those in the Guard and Reserves are based on what is considered active duty time, which is very different now than what it was when it was first defined. She feels this needs to be re-defined so Reservists don't feel that they are missing out on education benefits they'd been working towards.

Mr. Quintas thanked Ms. Velazquez for her comment but noted that that topic isn't one they are going to deep dive on yet because they struggle to find the right team within VA to host those conversations. He said they would be discussing their findings, but it wouldn't be specific to National Guard and Reserve, though it remains on their list of priorities.

Mr. Lyon shared that part of the problem is how the Reserve and National Guard can differ from state to state, and that makes it difficult to determine the points they are trying to find data on. Ms. Velazquez said that that's why it's important to start having these conversations and that from a federal perspective there should be a unanimous definition of what that looks like.

Dr. Haynie emphasized the challenge of developing that framework and what it looks like in the context of outcomes. He agreed that it is up to the Veteran to define what success looks like for themselves. He asked how to reconcile that perspective with the larger goal of answering the question of what good looks like.

Mr. Quintas agreed with Dr. Haynie but noted that he feels people can sometimes underestimate the ability of data to provide that clarity. The problem often is when the data is simplified and tried to be understood at too broad of a level. Mr. Quintas shared an example of soft signs at his job at Amazon, where they have a lot of ways to measure whether or not someone had a positive outcome such as how do they feel after, 30 days after, six months after? He felt this could be used by the VA as well.

Ms. Hoppin felt that one of the risks is introducing their own biases into suggested measures of outcome and that it is something they should keep aware of.

Mr. Salgado shared that on May 17, the DoE sent out a 1,100 page package talking about for Title IV, making a proposed rule for students that would have to pass a debt to earnings ratio for specific types of programs within higher education. He felt that was something the subcommittee may want to look into, because it may contain some of the information they're looking for. He also shared that the unintended consequence, because he's looking at it from a SCO standpoint, is who is going to be supplying this data? Is this going to be another reporting requirement of the schools and SCOs who then send the information up to VA or DoE to collect the data?

He feels that any time there is a new reporting requirement, it falls onto the SCOs to figure out a way to get the information and report it when they already have overfilled schedules. Mr. Lyon acknowledged that this is something to consider but there are a number of growing trends and industries where SCOs would not be involved in collecting data, especially not after a student has left or graduated.

Dr. Haynie emphasized the importance of using data to create informed consumers, and how there are a lot of ways to go about that. There need to be plans, metrics, and other measures of success for Veterans. There are many variables that need to be considered such as geography, why they're going to school, what other constraints they might be facing.

Ms. Roberts asked, who is the customer, and who are we trying to solve for? Is it the Veteran, is it academic institutions, the VA, the DoD? She shared her experience from the industry side where they pause and start to think of their customers, their different personas, and attach outcomes to a journey map so they can define if they are achieving value through those standard customized objectives during each of those touchpoints. There needs to be the ability to demonstrate value to the bodies of work that they are resourcing, so being able to define the story narrative and demonstrate what the outcomes are like for the customer. She also felt that when it comes to data, there is a piece for them to think about in terms of informed decision making.

Chair Dexter agreed that using some mapping tools and decision models may help them prioritize the goals. Vice Chair Hauk suggested that as they start to think about those personas and journey maps, they should work to identify what doesn't work from a data and metric perspective so they can eliminate data they don't need.

Mr. Lyon agreed they should be looking at some areas from a utilization perspective and what the industry might need in the spirit of trying to help and inform the consumer. He noted that if they only measure graduation rates they would find that it's not very high nationwide, but that metric is true for all students and not only Veterans. He shared that the DoE success rate metric doesn't ask if someone is a full-time student, how long, did you transfer, et cetera. It only asks when they started, and when they completed. He felt it was helpful for the Committee to understand they are trying to expand how the VA is looking at things.

Ms. Hoppin felt they should also try to expand the aperture of their work, because they can't take for granted that one of their clients is also Congress. She noted they have a big opportunity coming up when all the service chiefs go in front of Congress to talk about why they've missed their rating goals to look around and see what the effective programs are in place that could be added to or grown. If they are looking to futureproof the GI Bill, one of the things they need to consider is how to keep it fully funded.

Chair Dexter agreed with the importance of getting thoughts in terms of the different perspectives of who is a customer, but also thinking from a persona perspective if they are looking at a customer, stakeholder, decision maker, administrator, et cetera. She felt they should do more mapping versus casting a wide net and trying to improve things for everybody at once.

Vice Chair Hauk said they needed to be precise as far as customer versus stakeholder versus et cetera, because those definitions they arrive to in terms of who their customers are and who the stakeholders are relative to the work of the committee is going to drive how recommendations are shaped. He felt it also might drive potential timelines as far as those recommendations.

Mr. Lyon shared that with retention specifically, DoD had studied and publicly reported on the topic and the findings were that transferability did not impact retention at all. Ms. Hoppin said her point was that when she was talking to cadets at the academy she was stunned because they were already talking as 19 year olds that there's an opportunity for them to go into a career but they're also thinking about the holistic family perspective. She felt the data may not show that perspective and that's why she feels it's important to open the aperture on thinking about who the other stakeholders are.

Ms. Velazquez suggested that when it comes to modernization and futureproofing, potentially a statistic they should look at is why Veterans don't use their GI Bill. She shared the misconception that Reservists have is that the Reserve GI Bill doesn't pay for tuition. In addition to that, the GI Bill for Reservists is tied to their service while they're in, so the moment they are out their benefit expires. She felt this doesn't make sense for Reservists because if war breaks out or if they're filing in a billet or orders that need to be filled, they are not going to have time to go to school and utilize that benefit.

Mr. Quintas noted that maybe the question about customers shouldn't be answered within the subcommittee, but within the Committee as a whole because it applies to all of the subcommittees. He did feel they should put a timeline on it and dedicate a session to concluding that because it is tough for them to focus on other work with that left unanswered. Chair Dexter agreed that it was a Committee discussion.

Mr. Quintas shared that they have two other key topics Ms. Roberts was going to share information on and then pass the discussion to Mr. Lyon.

Ms. Roberts noted some of the things the subcommittee is thinking about is the shape of ongoing skills, a greater focus on understanding skills, upskilling, skills development, and leveraging some of the data they have on the LinkedIn side. She felt they should explore research around career selection, completion, the impact of long-term employment, and access to career opportunities. She also noted the opportunity to understand and research the demand for digital skills and what that means for the future of the workforce and how that might play into future recommendations.

The next recommendation from the subcommittee Mr. Roberts shared was to try to explore the opportunity for the VA to conduct greater analysis around the field of Gen AI, considering the conversations being had around how Gen AI will impact the work of the white collar workforce. They felt it was important to understand how Gen AI is going to impact higher learning institutions, skills-based programs, and certifications, not only from a usage standpoint but also consumption. They wanted to start thinking about how that technology could be leveraged by VA to streamline benefits and incorporate that into future strategy. She also noted how Gen AI will play a role as a path to employment, and to prepare for how to optimize that technology.

As it was nearly time to break for lunch, the Committee decided to put the subcommittee discussion on hold until after the rest of the presentations that day.

Veteran Experience Office Presentation

Chair Dexter introduced the next presenter, John Boerstler, from the Veterans Experience Office. Mr. Boerstler began by introducing himself and this colleagues, Jon Pruett and Mandy Tepfer. He shared with the Committee that he had reviewed their recommendations and would love to get more involved with what they are leaning into so they can improve the experience on both the education and transition side.

Mr. Boerstler began by sharing that they started their discovery research about two years prior, internal to VA with the Veterans Benefits Administration Office of Outreach and Transition and Economic Development. What they uncovered was many different pain points along the customer journey that are critically important, which came with opportunities to improve. The work he and his team does is to lead the President’s management agenda life experience work, which the Deputy Secretary stewards in the interagency space, particularly around the transition from military to civilian life. What they have been able to do with a much broader charter that includes external agencies has, and VA has not only leaned on those insights but also gotten them to a point where they can actually get a minimum viable product out and then start prototyping with service members and recently separated Veterans.

He shared a journey map and how the insights translate into opportunities. Their research showed that as a service member gets to one year prior to separation, it gets incredibly confusing, and the lack of navigation and direction and coordination throws them off. In their research about how service members transition to civilian life, it doesn't always go very well. With this data, they have a better opportunity from a customer acquisition and experience standpoint to engage and enroll more of these individuals and their families.

The insights translated to four opportunities, where they're going to focus in on improving the transition process, improving the life planning, and education and timing in program and service connection. Mr. Boerstler shared how they had developed four personas based on hundreds of interviews conducted with service members and recently separated Veterans.

Mr. Pruett continued the presentation and how their first step in codesign was to understand what the customers really want and the problems that emerge. What they did to help customers through those problem areas was bring all nine federal agencies and all five service branches together in a codesign workshop to understand what questions they need to answer in order to best serve the needs of these customers. They considered how they might simplify identification of customer goals so they can algin them with resources and actions despite competing priorities during transition, and also how to simply post-transition handoffs so they can provide additional resources after separation.

The SMEs involved in the space determined they wanted to ideate around a digital product or solution that would help to automatically tie and tether together these disparate concepts to try to ease the navigation process. After 12 weeks of codesign prototyping built with and by transitioning service members, they learned what things customers really wanted to see in a tool like that and how they expected it to work for them. The service members wanted to be able to set goals and think about the things they want after military service, then be able to take actionable steps that are needed in order to achieve those goals, with the ability to get help at any point if they get stuck along the way.

Mr. Pruett shared that they also found that customers prefer resources and actions to be identified in context with what they're already doing or striving to do. They also heard a desire to start as early as their first duty station in order to ensure they have enough time to accomplish any actions necessary prior to separation. Resources should also be discoverable as soon as they cross a threshold where they may need them. It should be easy to navigate, set up, start using, and be useful. He noted that with command support, they learned that transition in the DoD side is a commander's program, where the commander has the ability to treat the program in their own ways.

He shared that the last area they wrapped up was on May 24, 2023, which was about how to deliver the concept that they were told customers wanted. They were able to build a functional prototype, which he presented to the Committee. The prototype had sections for things like a personalized checklist, call to action, and getting help. He asked someone in the room to give him a question to put into the prototype.

Mr. Lyon asked if he could go to school and work at the same time. Mr. Pruett showed how the question could be sent through the AI bot which answered after a couple of seconds. The answer was not just a yes or no, but also gave information on how it can be challenging to balance responsibilities, the importance of scheduling, et cetera. Mr. Boerstler added that they can also include resources and future iterations will have clickable links and calls to action about finding out more about your benefits with a link.

Mr. Pruett proceeded to show how the prototype has a five step process to create a checklist, starting with collecting personal information and asking questions such as which branch they are in, if they are still on active duty, et cetera. He shared that the questions were all intentional, set around how they filter the information based on persona and customer type.

Once the information is input, it sends you to a goal selection step. After that, it goes to transition essentials, sharing the steps that are needed to be followed in order to complete a successful transition. It asks more questions and gives some more resources, and after all information has been filled out there is an option to create a PDF. The PDF is fillable, which means on a computer, the checkboxes and links work. He shared that the PDFs are also tailored and customized fully to exactly what the customer said.

He shared that the insights they found from creating that prototype were that a clean interface and easy navigation experience may give way to exploration of available resources. Many who tried the prototype appreciated the simplified navigation and delivering relevant content without extra images or menus. They liked how it gave them recommendations on how to achieve their goals, which they wouldn't know where to look for the resources without the tool. Mr. Pruett noted that they will be moving the program forward into MVP development in the next fiscal year and ultimately building it out and piloting it with customers.

Ms. Hoppin asked about the timeline and what year the rollout would be introduced. Mr. Pruett answered that there would be a development timeline before the pilot phase.

The pilot phase is projected for 14 months, and they feel FY25 would be when they would be scaling or maneuvering the pilot forward to additional sites, and probably a few years for a full rollout.

Mr. Boerstler shared that the insights gleaned from the sprint up until then have made their way into updates to the curriculum, the pre-separation guide everybody receives. They're trying to make it more consumable and customer-facing.

Ms. Velazquez asked if the tool would also be available for those in the National Guard and Reserve. Mr. Boerstler said all of DoD is concurring on the need for this improvement, and that everyone agrees the experience needs to be improved for transitioning members.

Ms. Tepfer continued the presentation, sharing that they made this plan into a holistic approach by working with subject matter experts across Veteran government to ensure the information being put into the tool is verified by them. She emphasized that it's only going to grow as they continue to perfect and test support it to ensure the information they are providing is not only factual but also leads to the action items and outcomes for their customers.

Mr. Lyon and Chair Dexter expressed their appreciation of the work the team were doing, and Chair Dexter said it was a valuable update.

Ms. Velazquez asked what the process looks like to ensure all the links that they have available are always up to date, if there is a quality control type of process to ensure the link goes where it needs to go. Mr. Pruett said one of their recommendations to the shared governance body is that they would be appointing or identifying a group that will take a strong look at the data and approve new content to make sure any sort of changes are vetted through the cross-agency collaborative. It will be checked on a yearly basis to ensure everything is connecting properly and all of the correct information is in the system.

Dr. Butler felt that as the package gets developed further, the interaction with providing well-informed and experience-based recommendations is going to be able to cover a lot of things you can't program into checkboxes. Vice Chair Hauk added that the forward-looking pieces of embedding links to resources in responses is a good way ahead.

Ms. Hoppin asked if there was any plan for a similar program for spouse transition that goes through DoL. Mr. Boerstler shared they had interviewed many spouses and other family members as part of the project and that it would be a good insight. Some of the SMEs that have helped develop that programming for spouses are a part of the transition codesign sprint.

With no further questions or presentation from the team, Chair Dexter thanked them for their time and introduced the next speaker.

Veteran Spouse Experience Project Presentation

Heather Real, CX strategist with the VEO and project lead for the Military to Veteran Spouse Experience Project, introduced herself and the senior design advisor for the project, Mandy Tepfer. Ms. Real began by giving an overview of the project, which was derived from the VACOE's 2021 report on education as a recommendation to chart the military to Veteran spouse experience as a foundation to understanding and building products and services that meet their unique needs.

She shared that OTED and VEO partnered to achieve three primary objectives: to identify pain points, bright spots and moments that matter to spouses, with an emphasis on the transition period; to identify areas of opportunity for VA engagement along key service functions that are also in the transition project; and creating a journey map to document the life cycle of military to Veteran spouse experience. VEO utilizes a design methodology called human centric design (HCD), which helps them to make systems and products more responsive to the people who use them. They use qualitative research to understand those customer needs and insights to inform changes to their own processes, services, and products, placing customers at the forefront.

Ms. Real continued, noting that learning is continuous and all of the steps in the program are meant to be revisited over time to ensure they're alleviating the pain points. HCD occurs along five different phases: scoping or problem framing; pre-discovery or desk side research; discovery, which is where they are currently at with the project; solution design; and implementation. They are currently in a 20 week discovery sprint that they have broken down along five key task areas. The first is research planning, then NGO and participant outreach, interviews, synthesis and insight generation, and artifact development. She shared that they are currently wrapping up the insight generation portion and moving on to journey map and persona creation.

The participant criteria was broad, ensuring representation from all components, branches, ages, races, and ethnicities, mirroring the total force. They did not include military spouses who were also active duty military, as they would be going through the military to Veteran experience. To ensure the wide range of participants, they utilized demographic pre-screening prior to scheduling one on one interviews. They also layered in utilization data from the transfer of GI Bill entitlement to ensure if and when that benefit is being transferred and utilized, whether or not that corresponds to changes in the spouse's overall journey.

Ms. Real shared they met data saturation in their target demographics due to an overwhelming reception and support of spouses involved. To guide their targets, they utilized the 2021 demographic dashboard on Military One Source which is the latest information available. They recently completed synthesis and are close to finalizing insights from the data collected. In contrast to qualitative research, during synthesis they focus on sentiments of groupings and not necessarily to the number underneath that grouping.

She showed the Committee a mural board with initial topic groupings and common threads. She also noted that they identified some initial prominent determinants, or life factors that impact the overall experience which seemed to transcend age, race, gender, and that is the presence of children and then also whether or not the spouse is career oriented.

Ms. Real moved on to highlighting developing trends from their research. Early indication is that the transition experience is just as stressful for spouses as it is for service members and for Veterans, and they found there are three life phases that are being expressed by spouses. The first is early years in service, characterized by feelings of survival and isolation. The middle years of service are characterized by personal sacrifice and uncertainty. The final years in transition are laid with feelings of anticipation and loss. In the post-service years, the data found that spouses are mostly desiring to regain a sense of community, trying to kickstart their careers, finding purpose, and supporting the family financially.

They also found that spouse wanted to build skills to emotionally support their family during this time. After interviewing and checking back in with each spouse, they also found that many did not know all of the resources available to them such as the GI Bill or Personalized Career Planning and Guidance Program.

She shared the next steps of the program now that synthesis is complete, and insights are nearly finalized. They are going to move into compiling those findings into three artifacts: key personas, journey map, and findings report. With this, her presentation was finished, and she opened the floor for questions.

Ms. Velazquez said she was curious to see what the current age demographic is for recruitment across he military, and then what that age demographic is protected. She felt with the current economic stance of their country along with where things seem to be headed from a military standpoint, the military is still seen as an opportunity to get out of a bad financial situation or anything of that nature. She was curious to see what that looks like because needs start to change. Ms. Real answered that some of the spouses from the interviews who came in a little older tended to be more career oriented on that scale and don’t need quite as much in terms of financial assistance or education but also kind of exclude themselves from the military community because they already have a network outside of it. She felt the problem then becomes; how do we bring these spouses in when they didn't grow up in the community?

Ms. Hoppin thanked Ms. Real and Ms. Tepfer for the work they are doing, sharing that one of her frustrations was that the VA had so many benefits but because there was not a journey map, spouses didn't know what they were eligible for. She thought this program was great for making sure they do know about and utilize what they can.

Mr. Lyon also thanked them for their presentation and pointed out that the word spouse might be confusing to those who may not have been married during their time in the military and may have been domestic partners or long term living situations, et cetera. He encourage the usage of inclusive language where possible. Ms. Real thanked him for his feedback.

Chair Dexter thanked Ms. Real and Ms. Tepfer as well, expressing her appreciation for the focus to bring in more families and emphasizing the importance of the family unit. With that, the Committee took a brief break.

Modernization Subcommittee Discussion Continued

Chair Dexter reminded the Committee they would be sending out potential dates for the October meeting so they can reach a consensus as soon as possible. She recounted that they had left off with the two issues Ms. Roberts had presented them with. Chair Dexter said he found the Gen AI component very intriguing and hoped it would help improve the customer experience.

Dr. Butler commented that looking at modernization, it's important to recognize generations who also may not know how to use the new technology and help them in some way. He felt that the fact they were looking at it was important and critical moving forward.

Ms. Velazquez asked what the current age demographic in the armed forces is who are being recruited and suggested taking a look at what types of benefits they could potentially be utilizing. Chair Dexter said that tied back to an earlier discussion about wanting data around how effective the GI Bill is as a retention or recruitment tool.

Mr. Lyon shared that the institute for Veterans and Military Families reported on that topic. In 2011, the shift came from primary motivation for enlistment to being education at the top of the list. He said the Pentagon cites that half of enlistments come from high school students, and the other half come from current college students or people coming from the industry. Vice Chair Hauk shared that the Center for Naval Analyses does annual accession studies on behalf of USDP&R which breaks down all of the accession demographics for both officer and enlisted.

Chair Dexter gave a brief overview of what the modernization subcommittee had been focusing on, starting with the kind of technology around the usage of the tool. They realized that was not necessarily the priority for the Committee's work, so moved on to future proofing at large versus just modernization of technology. With no further questions on Ms. Robert's part of the subcommittee presentation, she turned the floor over to Mr. Lyon for his part.

Mr. Lyon shared that he would be covering two areas, and started with how they are drafting a subcommittee recommendation to conduct research to understand why some beneficiaries do not use any of their education benefits. They feel there could be more insights towards understanding people who are eligible for, but not accessing, benefits. He noted the difficulty this data could be to get, considering how benefits have changed over the years as well as eligibility for those benefits.

The second area is for the subcommittee to draft a recommendation to conduct research to understand if the lack of marketing for non-degree programs might be impacting those beneficiaries who do not use any of their education benefits. Mr. Lyon noted that communications isn't exclusively marketing or vice versa, but they were able to get briefings as a subcommittee relative to marketing and the answer was mostly social media.

They learned it was one of the best marketing reaches the VA cites, and it uses a series of metrics for this including number of followers across different social media platforms, number of impressions, number of engagements, et cetera. He shared that they found that the overwhelming majority of beneficiaries who do utilize their education benefits do so to attend college, defined as the pursuit of a two-year degree to a terminal degree.

Dr. Butler suggested that the subcommittee make sure to emphasize the reason for wanting to gather that data, which is to identify how to make changes to help those who don't utilize their benefits. Mr. Lyon thanked him and concurred. He used the example of ensuring people know they can use the GI Bill for more than traditional college, so if some of those who are not utilizing their benefits are because they don't want to go to traditional college, they might use it if they knew they could go into a trade or get a certificate.

Chair Dexter thanked all of the subcommittees for their hard work and moved on to the public comment portion of the meeting.

Public Comments

Ms. Goodale-Porter introduced herself again and expressed her thanks for being able to see the Committee working in action. She shared that she was a foreign service kid who grew up with her father in the military which gave her a strong impetus to serve, so education wasn't her reason for serving.

She then passed around a document and commented that one of the issues with education is that some of the communication materials are inaccurate, having words that shouldn't be included like full time, which can throw off people who don't understand how the term is used. She noted that benefits are supposed to work dual military families, and this is being honored in the breach.

She also shared a document which included the case which said that the child of two Veterans is supposed to be getting two sets of Chapter 35, citing that it is out of the National Archives and that the VA knew ahead of time that the case was going to set precedent and have to be followed. She noted that it is not being followed and there has been a lot of confusion. She pointed out two charts on the document, made by her husband, which shows how the child of two Veterans is being harmed by this action.

Ms. Goodale-Porter reviewed scenarios surrounding whether one parent provides eligibility but the second has a disability rating of a certain percentage. She shared how she was put in contact with Tom Alphonso, and he agreed that it is an interpretation the VA is making out of the statue section on non-duplication benefits in Chapter 35, and that he would run a more Veteran friendly one up the chain of command. She expressed her gratitude for his response. She moved on to reiterating how misinformation is damaging, and how she had experienced different answers from people who weren't properly trained.

She shared that she had contacted two Veterans overseas who may be a good contact for the Committee, and the second is talking about Chapter 35 and how all three of his children are denied the benefit. Ms. Goodale-Porter said that after doing the math, over the last three years that all GI Bill benefits have been denied overseas, it comes up to almost $330,000,000,000. She feels that these denials may come across as non-utilization when the Veterans are trying to utilize them but can't because they live overseas. She pointed out that her husband went to the University of Colon and had no tuition because the foreign governments paid the bills, but the VA refuses to honor Chapter 35 benefits overseas.

Ms. Goodale-Porter finished her presentation with asking that the Committee help get the education benefits for those overseas and other Chapter 35 beneficiaries. She thanked the Committee again for their time.

Final Comments and Adjournment

Chair Dexter thanked Ms. Goodale-Porter. Being at the end of the agenda, she also thanked everyone who attended or watched or listened to the meeting, and that there would be a lot of follow-up items coming out of the meeting. She asked Vice Chair Hauk if he had any closing remarks.

Vice Chair Hauk also thanked everybody for attending. With that, Chair Dexter called the meeting to a close.

Mona Dexter July 3, 2023