

**Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans' Advisory Committee on Education
Recommendations and VA Response October 2021**

The Veterans' Advisory Committee on Education (Committee) had three focus areas for fiscal year 2021: Modernization of Education Service's IT Systems, Distance Learning and On-the-Job Training/Apprenticeships. The Committee's 12 recommendations fall into these 3 categories as follows, along with the VA response.

Modernization of Education Service's IT Systems

Recommendation 1: Eliminate manual processes. VA education benefits must incorporate the use of technology into delivery systems as well as driving the rapid expansion of mobile capabilities to enhance delivery of benefits. The Digital GI Bill is a comprehensive effort to deliver highly integrated and coordinated education benefits. However, there remain isolated processes that rely on manual actions that should be identified and eliminated (i.e., eliminate spreadsheets, eliminate manual data entry/re-entry/transfer).

Rationale: The Digital GI Bill (DGIB) serves as the first step towards a digital transformation for Education Service. Presently, there is still a reliance on multiple tools that do not integrate into the new platform and thus will struggle to automate actions that must instead be done manually. Manual data entry or transference is subject to error. It can and should be eliminated by the expanded use of machine learning tools.

Request: The Committee requests an audit of processes across Education Service to identify and eliminate continued reliance on manual processes with an update on the progress to the Committee no later than May 2022.

VA Response: Concur-in-principle. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), through initiatives such as VA Education Service's DGIB, is diligently working on eliminating manual processes, when feasible, as part of an overall modernization initiative. VA's Education Service will provide an update on the progress of the DGIB project and its automation work to the Committee by the end of the third quarter of Fiscal Year (FY) 2022. If, at that time, the Committee has specific recommendations for processes it would like to see automated, VA would be happy to discuss them.

Recommendation 2: Protect IT program funding. The VA must ensure that leaders and staff have the resources, specifically uninterrupted funding, to deliver excellent customer experiences. IT program funding, if not protected, can be reallocated, negatively impacting modernization efforts.

Rationale: When budgets are set to support Education Service's digital work, those funds do not always remain available to maintain project plans and implementation. This can put the program goals at risk, significantly extend the delivery timeline and place other dependent programs at risk.

Request: The Committee requests an analysis and delivery to the Secretary of how changing budget priorities have affected full implementation of IT solutions over the last 10 years and an update on progress provided to the Committee no later than May 2022.

VA Response: Concur. This analysis can be provided by the end of the third quarter of FY 2022 if the focus is narrowed to the VA Education Service's information technology solutions funding.

Recommendation 3: Compatibility of VA IT systems. The VA is transforming business operations by modernizing systems to provide world-class customer service to Veterans and employees. VA's digital services must be represented by a single, high-quality, mobile-friendly self-service tool. This requires an integrated database and synchronized IT modernization throughout the entire Department across all three administrations, including reduction of internal competition for funds.

Rationale: VA education benefits customers are VA customers first. Their experience across all services should be seamless. The databases and IT systems that manage their identity and services must be fully compatible and integrated.

Request: The Committee requests an audit across the VA to verify that the customer user experience includes a single-sign on capability and offers a seamless transition across all benefit accounts so that all data flows across integrated and compatible systems throughout the entire Department while remaining secure. The Committee asks for an update on this no later than May 2022.

VA Response: Concur-in-principle. VA Education Service can provide the Committee with an update on single sign-on capability across VA by the end of the third quarter of FY 2022. May 2022.

Recommendation 4: Communication across government agencies. Interagency communication is essential to making the customer's experience seamless as they transition from military service to Veteran beneficiary status. VA must work with other Government agencies—to include but not limited to the Department of Defense (DOD), Department of Education (ED) and Department of Labor (DOL)—to ensure a seamless and less burdensome transition so that all eligible beneficiaries have a clear path to economic security and well-being.

Rationale: The work of Education Service requires interagency communication for a variety of issues, mostly in benefits certification. For example, to verify eligibility for education benefits, VA might need to coordinate between multiple entities within DOD. In addition to enhancing mechanisms for better communication, keeping up with what other agencies are doing pertaining to best practices allows Education Service, and VA as a whole, to embrace a whole Government effort to support its beneficiary population.

Request: The Committee requests an audit across the VA's partner Departments and Agencies (to include but not limited to DOD, ED, DOL) to verify that the customer experience is seamless and that data flows across systems while remaining secure. The Committee asks for an update on this no later than May 2022.

VA Response: Concur-in-principle. VA coordinates and collaborates with DOD, DOL and ED at various levels on many topics. For education and training benefits, this coordination and collaboration includes coordinating oversight with ED; working with DOD to align systems for Service members to transition and start using their benefits based on accurate service data; and DOL to ensure effective execution of apprenticeships and the Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program. VA advocates for seamless customer service through those existing partnerships. VA's Education Service will provide an update on this matter by the end of the third quarter of FY 2022.

Recommendation 5: Education benefits as a gateway to the VA. VA should develop solutions with the customer experience as the focal point and provide a single common user experience through the multiple points of entry into VA gateway, meaning a single database/sign-on with numerous services available (e.g., how Wells Fargo offers savings/checking, investment, the ability to wire funds, management of safety deposit boxes, etc.). Perhaps the GI Bill is the main entry point due to its current work. To be most effective as a unit and to improve efficiencies within VBA, we see a connection between Education Service and the larger VA enterprise.

Rationale: Veterans and all eligible beneficiaries deserve highly integrated care and support, along with excellent customer service. Their first experience with the VA should be welcoming and easy. VA also should take advantage of this encounter to ensure that all eligible beneficiaries fully understand the range of support services and benefits that they have earned.

Request: The Committee requests development of a digital gateway mechanism to leverage education benefits for effective customer acquisition to convert GI Bill customers into lifelong users of VA services and to provide an introduction to the broad range of services with ease of transition between VA Administrations and services.

VA Response: Concur-in-principle. VA also has been focused on improving its digital gateway or "front door." In 2018, the main VA.gov website was redesigned to shift from a "VA as an organization" to a "customer-first" platform. The new site contains content that focuses on the top 20 tasks across all benefits and services that 80% of VA's customers have been shown to need; the ability to login to receive a personalized experience; and easy-to-understand plain language content. Specific to VA Education modernization, VA is working closely with partners across the VA enterprise, including VA.gov, to deliver an experience of applying for and receiving GI Bill benefits that is in line with VA's customer-centric goals. This improved user experience will help drive utilization and retention for future VA benefits and services.

Recommendation 6: Continue to adopt Agile program management principles across the enterprise. Agile project management is an iterative approach to product delivery that builds incrementally from the start of the project, instead of trying to deliver the entire product at once near the end. Agile is a program management approach that allows you to build while responding to changes. Teams operate in short cycles aimed at continuous improvement to develop only what the users want.

Rationale: Agile focuses on enabling teams to deliver work in small, workable increments, thus delivering value to their customers with ease. It enhances strategic agility and focuses on customers. It supports the VA's business strategy to ensure an agile response to changing Veteran needs and marketplace volatility and incorporating a value management approach to capital investments.

Request: The Committee requests a report on how the VA incorporates and will continue to implement Agile program management principles. We request the VA incorporate more Agile program management training and practices into the development and execution of VA education benefits IT modernization efforts. The Committee asks for an update on this no later than May 2022.

VA Response: Concur. VA Education Service executed all DGIB releases to date leveraging the Scaled Agile Framework (SAFe) methodology and plans to continue using agile development for future implementations of the DGIB initiative as well as to ensure the agile development framework is incorporated across all of the VA Education Service application updates. VA Education Service will provide an overview of its progress by the end of the third quarter of FY 2022.

Distance Learning

Recommendation 7: Adopt a true Risk Based Survey (RBS) model. The Committee recommends that Education Service adopt the RBS model developed in partnership with the National Association of State Approving Agencies (NASAA) and deploy that model nationwide next year, to ensure quality programming while safeguarding Veterans' educational benefits.

Rationale: RBSs are required by law. Section 310 of the Colmery Act amended 38 United States Code section 3673(d), which currently reads: "The Secretary may utilize the services of a State Approving Agency for conducting compliance and risk-based surveys and other such oversight purposes as the Secretary, in consultation with [SAAs], considers appropriate without regard to whether the Secretary or the agency approved the courses offered in the State concerned." Furthermore, Section 1013 of the Isakson Roe Act sets forward minimum requirements for RBS visits, mandates the Secretary develop RBSs in partnership with SAAs and requires SAAs begin doing only RBS visits in October 2022.

Request: The Committee asks for an update on this no later than May 2022.

VA Response: Concur. Isakson and Roe Section 1013 requires the Secretary of Veteran Affairs to work with the State Approving Agencies (SAA) to develop a comprehensive program to conduct risk-based surveys. The provision is effective October 1, 2022. VA Education Service has been working with the SAAs to meet the fiscal year 2023 requirement. VA Education Service will provide an update on the progress of this effort by the end of the third quarter of FY 2022.

Recommendation 8: Increase MHA for quality online learning. The Committee recommends that the Secretary propose legislation to Congress that would increase the GI Bill Monthly Housing Allowance (MHA) benefit to not penalize unfairly Veterans who chose to pursue their education online. This proposal should provide for more equitable payment of MHA and could be tied to metrics which would ensure quality programming as well as consistency across all delivery modalities and service areas/zip codes.

Rationale: A concern is that some student Veterans are choosing classes and programs based upon area of delivery (due to the increased MHA) as opposed to program quality or other need concerns. Many Veterans and military-affiliated students need or desire an online learning modality. It is important for the VA to engage with stakeholders such as VA approved universities, the National Association of Veterans' Program Administrators and VSOs such as the Student Veterans Association, Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors and Military Officers Association of America that support Veterans, families, caregivers and survivors.

Request: The Committee asks for an update on this no later than May 2022.

VA Response: While VA cannot provide specific comment on potential legislative proposals (LPs), VA appreciates the Committee's input and will consider the comments when reviewing the need to update our current statutory authorities.

Recommendation 9: Review and update regulatory language. The Committee recommends the Education Service undertake a complete review of existing regulations regarding online learning with the objective of updating language such that it will be consistent and sustainable for all sectors of the Code of Federal Regulations referencing education and will reflect the latest learning and agreements on terminology across all Federal agencies, such as VA, ED and DoD.

Rationale: Over the past several decades, education terminology and modality have changed greatly and language within the regulations has not kept pace. Likewise, VA has introduced new concepts and language in recent policy advisories that has created some confusion among approved facilities and GI Bill students. For example, recent changes in the meaning of 85/15 have created consternation. The definition of online learning itself remains at issue given as VA refers to the online modality of learning as

“independent study,” whereas practitioners and ED see that as a completely different method of learning unrelated to distance education.

Request: The Committee asks for an update on this no later than May 2022.

VA Response: Concur. “Distance learning” is defined in statute, and any term defined in statute cannot be changed by regulation, VA will explore regulations that better define terms such as “independent study” and “resident training.” VA Education Service will provide the requested update on its plan to update related VA regulations no later than May 2022.

On-the-Job Training/Apprenticeships

Recommendation 10: Create an experience/journey map for eligible military spouses. Create an experience or journey map for eligible spouses to better understand where and when resources are available. Veterans get a full and clear VA experience whereas spouses frequently go through different avenues such as the Department of Labor for information. This would require some clarification around eligibility for programs for spouses through their transition from an active-duty spouse to a transitioning spouse, and then to a Veteran spouse. There are a number of variances on when an individual becomes a military spouse throughout a military member’s service timeline.

Rationale: Military spouse eligibility for VA benefits is not readily accessible in a clear format at different life cycle stages during transition. Spouses may be the only person working in the family and having access to resources will help the family unit while ensuring information is widely available to all who need it. Spouses also often serve as gatekeepers of information within the family unit. Since spouses are eligible for different resources and benefits at different stages during transition, creating an experience or journey map will provide clarity on what resources are available at different points during transition.

Request: Create an experience or journey map for eligible spouses for the life cycle of a military spouse and Veteran spouse. We believe this would serve as a starting point for building a comprehensive toolkit of resources for military, transitioning and Veteran spouses.

VA Response: Concur. VA seeks to better understand the physical, mental and emotional needs of transitioning Service members, with a particular emphasis on women, African Americans and younger Veterans, as they transition from military to civilian life. The goal of this project is to increase the understanding of the military-to-civilian transition space by providing written and visual artifacts depicting Service members’, Veterans’ and families’ experiences as they transition from military to civilian life. The artifacts will then be used to develop tangible tools and products to improve the military to civilian experience. This project includes a customer experience measurement tool that provides real-time feedback and service recovery opportunities

regarding the military-to-civilian transition experience. This proactive project procures insights from VA's future customers to develop useful tools to deliver a world-class experience to our customers.

Recommendation 11: Make transition resources available to all beneficiaries. Make 100% of transition resources available to all beneficiaries. Improve information provided to military spouses (active duty, transitioning and Veteran) through the TAP program on OJT/Apprenticeships.

Rationale: Spouse attendance at the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is restricted, based on availability, and there is a lack of consistency in the information shared when a Veteran or spouse goes through the VA TAP or DOL Transition Employment Assistance for Military Spouses and Caregivers (TEAMS). One is VA-heavy and the other is DOL-heavy and the two paths do not share resources that the other offers. A spouse will benefit from information and resources provided in both tracks, such as On the Job Training (OJT)/Apprenticeship programs, which is why having access to VA and DOL information is important to the Veteran and spouse and will make the transition experience more consistent. Having access to information from both tracks (TAP and TEAMS) also will help get Veterans in the door at VA.

Request: Request that VA and DOL share information with each other on programs that would be useful to those going through the other track (TAP vs. TEAMS). In addition, request VA and DOL collaborate to create a toolkit provided to all beneficiaries to ensure they have knowledge of VA resources, benefits, and eligibility as well as those of DOL.

VA Response: Concur-in-principle with the recommendation to make transition resources available to all transitioning Service member's spouses and/or caregivers.

It is important to note that the web-based versions of VA Benefits and Services course, Women's Health Transition Training and Military Life Cycle modules are available via the DOD learning management system located at www.TAPEvents.mil. Web-based versions are accessible at any time and allow much needed flexibility for transitioning Service members spouses and/or caregivers. Spouses also are encouraged to attend the VA Benefits and Services instructor-led course, which is offered in-person (classroom) and instructor-led virtual, if there are limited spaces due to transitioning Service member demand and COVID protocols. The DOL courses also are available at www.TAPEvents.mil. Outreach, Transition and Economic Development (OTED) agrees that the goal should be to ensure spouses and/or caregivers are aware of the transition resources available to them. Moreover, VA and DOL have a strong partnership and leverage the TAP interagency governance structure to ensure useful program information is provided to transitioning Service members, their spouses and caregivers in a timely manner. A toolkit may be duplicative in effort, but VA is open to working with DOL within the current TAP governance structure to assess duplication and/or the need to expand existing efforts to include a toolkit.

Recommendation 12: Define transition program success metrics for military spouses. VA and the DOL need to define and track transition program success metrics for military spouses. Tracking success will help provide insights on where gaps in accessing information exist. Having this data will ensure spouses receive information at necessary points during the transition process, which can help inform meaningful choices such as whether to pursue OJT/ Apprenticeship options. This is regardless of which track they go through. Metrics also should evaluate efficacy of transition programs to make them better in the future. For example:

- **Are spouses receiving information on VA programs?**
- **Are there statistics on spouses using OJT/Apprenticeship programs?**

Rationale: Veterans and spouses look to the VA to provide clear information to guide military members in making informed decisions. VA has collaborative, high-performing and integrated delivery networks, such as the Digital GI Bill, that enhance Veteran and family well-being and independence. Tracking success metrics for spouses who go through TAP and TEAMS will be beneficial because there is a gap in sharing resources that the Veterans Experience Office provides to Veterans. VA aims to have a 90% success rate to get Veterans in the door accessing resources and, by bringing military spouses onboard as partners, VA can meet this success metric. Military spouses often serve as gatekeepers and information gatherers and bringing them along in the process honors the fact that the Service members and spouses go the through transition together. Tracking success metrics also will ensure access to information is streamlined for Veterans and military spouses.

Request: Define success measures for military spouses going through transition programs with VA and DOL. Track program success for military spouses as previously defined herein.

VA Response: Concur-in-principle. VA agrees that military spouses often serve as gatekeepers and information gatherers. However, transitioning Service member data is captured/owned by DOD, while military spouses who attend VA TAP courses are not required to provide their information to VA, nor is VA authorized to request the level of information required to track their participation. Therefore, establishing measures in the absence of mandate is not supported by VA.

**Department of Veterans Affairs
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