

STATEMENT OF
ERIC A. HILLEMAN, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE SERVICE
VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

WITH RESPECT TO

H.R. 3082, VETERAN-OWNED SMALL BUSINESS PROMOTION ACT OF 2006
H.R. 4791, DISABLED VETERANS ADAPTIVE HOUSING IMPROVEMENT ACT
DRAFT BILL, VETERANS STATE GRANT IMPROVEMENT ACT OF 2006
DRAFT BILL, GI BILL FLEXIBILITY ACT OF 2006
DRAFT BILL, VETERANS CERTIFICATION AND LICENSURE ACT OF 2006

WASHINGTON, D.C.

APRIL 27, 2006

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

On behalf of the 2.4 million men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. (VFW) and our Auxiliaries, I appreciate the opportunity to present our views on legislation included in today's hearing.

H.R. 3082, the "Veteran-Owned Small Business Promotion Act of 2005" would require that nine percent of all Department of Veterans Affairs procurement contracts be awarded to veterans. The VFW enthusiastically supports H.R. 3082. Job security and business development for veterans and disabled veterans are one of the VFW's priority goals. Through contracts and partnering with large companies, veteran-owned small businesses can thrive, thus raising the standard of living among veterans and promoting small business ownership.

H.R. 4791, the "Disabled Veterans Adaptive Housing Improvement Act" would increase the one-time grant amount of matching funds for disabled veterans' home purchases and modifications. The grant would be indexed yearly to keep pace with housing and building costs. The VFW supports the spirit of H.R. 4791, but we question the use of national averages to measure the increase of housing costs.

The current matching grant maximum is \$50,000 for structural manipulation and purchase; and \$10,000 for hardware and mechanics required for adaptive living. A \$60,000 benefit may go

far in the rural areas of America, but veterans that reside in major population centers face a much higher cost-of-living. We ask that Congress to consider regional housing cost averages, when determining the maximum grant amount.

The draft bill entitled “Veterans Employment State Grant Improvement Act of 2006,” seeks to increase accountability and improve performance among Department of Labor (DOL) veterans’ employment representatives. The VFW recognizes the need to assist veterans in obtaining employment in all professions nationwide. We believe this legislation will serve to improve current deficits in training for DOL outreach program specialists and local veterans’ employment representatives.

We vigorously support this bill, but ask Congress to consider the timely implementation of this legislation. Implementing performance evaluations three years after this bill’s enactment fails to measure current populations of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Furthermore, the proposed two-year phase-in of licensing and certification on a state level puts currently discharging veterans at a disadvantage. Finally, requiring a national training session for local veterans’ employment representatives would be better served upon their hiring, as opposed to attending training within the suggested first three-year employment time frame. We also favor ongoing training for current veterans’ employment representatives.

The draft bill entitled “GI Bill Flexibility Act” aims to expand licensure and certification by allowing lump-sum payments to areas of industry that have “a critical shortage of employees or that [are a] high growth industry, as determined by the Secretary of Labor.”

The VFW has long called for the expansion of licensure and certification programs, which can frequently lead to rewarding careers, and we have also supported expanding the GI Bill by making it more flexible and adaptable to the real needs of veterans. Despite this, we have several concerns about this legislation.

We are wary that the definition of the industries this would cover is overly broad, and that in some cases, it could lead to careers that might not provide much long-term benefit. The Department of Labor’s definition currently includes such broad industries as “hospitality” and “retail.” While certainly rewarding careers can be found within those industries, we do not believe that those industries are the intent of the legislation. We believe that the definition of which types of programs are eligible needs to be tightened up, making it easier for veterans to find truly rewarding careers in high-paying jobs.

Our second concern has to do with oversight. With the expansion of the program, we can also envision companies and businesses springing up to provide these educational training opportunities for veterans. While the vast majority of companies are sure to provide legitimate service, there will likely be opportunity for fraud and abuse. We cannot let unscrupulous companies take advantage of veterans, especially when it comes to their invaluable education benefits. We need to see that there is vigorous oversight, meaningful evaluation, and accreditation of these companies.

We support the idea behind the bill, but cannot support the draft legislation as written until these concerns are addressed.

The draft bill entitled “Veterans Certification and Licensure Act of 2006” would establish a committee within the Department of Labor comprised of numerous organizations with the goal of certification, credentialing, and licensure of troops transitioning from active duty into the workforce. The committee’s intent would be to bridge the gap between active duty and workforce licensure.

Many job fields in the military provide troops with the necessary skills and knowledge to perform civilian jobs requiring licensure. Military experience in areas requiring licensure in the private sector such as heavy equipment operation, transportation, electronics, and construction are highly transferable skills. This committee would serve to close the gap in transition that is currently faced by many troops leaving the military. The VFW encourages improvements to the transferability of certifications and increased employability for all veterans. The VFW strongly supports the enactment of this bill and the creation of this committee.

Thank you for this opportunity to present the VFW’s views on pending legislation before this subcommittee.