

**STATEMENT OF
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NATIONAL ECONOMIC COMMISSION
THE AMERICAN LEGION
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

ON

H.R. 4791, THE "DISABLED VETERANS ADAPTIVE HOUSING IMPROVEMENT ACT;" AND THREE DRAFT BILLS: THE "VETERANS EMPLOYMENT STATE GRANT IMPROVEMENT ACT OF 2006;" THE "GI BILL FLEXIBILITY ACT OF 2006;" THE "VETERANS LICENSING AND CREDENTIALING ACT OF 2006;" AND A PROPOSED AMENDMENT TO: H.R. 3082, THE "VETERAN-OWNED SMALL BUSINESS PROMOTION ACT OF 2005."

APRIL 27, 2006

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for this opportunity to submit The American Legion's views on the issues being considered by the Subcommittee today. The American Legion commends the Subcommittee for holding a hearing to discuss these important and timely issues.

H.R. 4791, the "Disabled Veterans Adaptive Housing Improvement Act"

H.R. 4791 seeks to amend title 38, United States Code, to increase the amount of assistance available to disabled veterans for specially adapted housing and to provide for annual increases in such amount. If enacted, the bill would increase from \$50,000 to \$60,000 the amount that a veteran can be assisted with for one housing unit and from \$10,000 to \$12,000 the amount that a veteran can be assisted with for a residence already adapted with special features. The Secretary would establish a residential home cost-of-construction index, which shall reflect a uniform national average increase in the cost of residential home construction, determined on a calendar year basis.

The American Legion believes that with the increasing numbers of disabled veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, the need for specially adapted housing is paramount. Specially adapted housing grants are available for the installation of wheel chair ramps, chair lifts, modifications to kitchens and bathrooms and other adaptations to homes for veterans who cannot move about without the use of wheelchairs, canes or braces or who are blind and suffer the loss or loss of use of one lower extremity. Special home adaptation grants are available for veterans who are legally blind or have lost the use of both hands. Given the rising costs of construction materials and services, The American Legion is pleased to support this pending

legislation that would raise these allowances and allow the grants to be paid to adapt the homes of parents or siblings caring for disabled veterans.

Draft Bill, “Veterans Employment State Grant Improvement Act of 2006”

The “Veterans Employment State Grant Improvement Act of 2006” seeks to amend title 38, United States Code, to improve employment services for veterans provided under the Department of Labor’s Veterans’ Employment and Training Services (VETS) program, and for other purposes.

The American Legion’s position regarding VETS program is that this is and should remain a national program with Federal oversight and accountability. The mission of VETS is to promote the economic security of America’s veterans. This stated mission is executed by assisting veterans in finding meaningful employment. The American Legion views VETS program as one of the best-kept secrets in the Federal government. It is comprised of many dedicated individuals who struggle to maintain a quality program without substantial funding and staffing increases.

Annually, DoD discharges approximately 250,000 service members. Recently separated service personnel are likely to seek immediate employment or are preparing to continue their formal or vocational education. In order for VETS program to assist these veterans to achieve their goals, it needs to:

- Improve by expanding its outreach efforts with creative initiatives designed to improve employment and training services for veterans;
- Provide employers with a labor pool of quality applicants with marketable and transferable job skills;
- Provide information on identifying military occupations that require licenses, certificates or other credentials at the local, state, or national levels;
- Eliminate barriers to recently separated service personnel and assist in the transition from military service to the civilian labor market;
- Strive to be a proactive agent between the business and veterans’ communities in order to provide greater employment opportunities for veterans.

The American Legion believes staffing levels for Disabled Veterans’ Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists and Local Veterans’ Employment Representatives (LVERs) should match the needs of the veterans’ community in each state and not be based solely on the fiscal needs of the state government. Such services will continue to be crucial as today’s active duty service members, especially those returning from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan, transition into the civilian world. Education and vocational training and employment opportunities enable these veterans to succeed in their future endeavors. Adequate funding will allow the programs to increase staffing to provide comprehensive case management job assistance to disabled and other eligible veterans. The American Legion believes that the military experience is essential to understanding the unique needs of the veteran; therefore, we strongly recommend that all LVERs, as well as all DVOPs, should be honorably discharged veterans.

The American Legion is supportive of the “Veterans Employment State Grant Improvement Act of 2006” and other measures that will improve employment services for veterans provided under the Veterans’ Employment and Training Service.

Draft Bill, “GI Bill Flexibility Act of 2006”

The “GI Bill Flexibility Act of 2006” seeks to amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for additional flexibility in the accelerated payment of basic educational assistance for certain courses of education, and for other purposes. The bill would aim to help veterans enrolled in an approved program of education that leads to a certification or licensure in an occupation; does not lead to an associate or higher degree; and leads to employment in an occupation in an industry that has a critical shortage of employees or that is a high growth industry, as determined by the Secretary of Labor.

Not every veteran is destined for college; therefore, the Montgomery GI Bill needs to be more accessible for those veterans with vocational aspirations other than college. The overall costs of these “short-term” vocational training and licensing programs far exceed the monthly stipend provided under the traditional “college-student-for-36-months” approach in the current Montgomery GI Bill.

Veterans should be afforded the opportunity to attend compressed high-front-end-cost programs that will lead to the vocation of their choice. Veterans, who attend these programs, should have the opportunity to use a portion of their earned benefits at an accelerated rate, but may not be permitted to exhaust all of their earned benefits. Expanded options will also increase utilization of the Montgomery GI Bill that now stands at a little over 50 percent.

In addition, a higher percentage of today’s service members are married (with children in the majority of cases) when they are discharged. Meeting the financial obligations to sustain and maintain a household is paramount, and often serves as a major obstacle to their timely use of the Montgomery GI Bill. Every effort must be made to empower these, and every veteran with options to make the best vocational choice to help them achieve the American dream.

The American Legion supports the provisions of the “GI Bill Flexibility Act of 2006” because the current unemployment rate for veterans ages 18 to 24 is 15 percent, compared to the private sector rate of 8 percent. Increasing the educational benefit available through the MGIB would provide a better incentive for veterans to complete a program with immediate employment results, without the concern of going into short-term debt. In addition, The American Legion strongly supports the expansion of the program to include other short-term programs of value that could lead to the immediate employment of veterans.

Draft Bill, “Veterans Licensing and Credentialing Act of 2006”

The “Veterans Licensing and Credentialing Act of 2006” seeks to establish the Veterans Advisory Committee on Certification, Credentialing, and Licensure. The Committee shall establish and carry out a national program to do the following: (1) To facilitate the seamless transition of members of the Armed Forces from serving on active duty to employment in the

private sector through credentialing. (2) To collect and disseminate data on certification, licensing, and credentialing programs of the Department of Defense, the Department of Labor, The Department of Veterans Affairs, and of States. (3) To advise the Secretary of Labor on all matters relating to certification, licensing, and credentialing issues related to converting the skills acquired by veterans while serving in the Armed Forces to skills relevant to civilian occupations.

The American Legion supports the provisions of the “Veterans Licensing and Credentialing Act of 2006” because it is our position, as supported by The American Legion 2004 Resolution, number 292, that efforts should be made to eliminate employment barriers that impede the transfer of military job skills to the civilian labor market. Furthermore The American Legion supports that the Department of Defense should take appropriate steps to ensure that the service members be trained, tested, evaluated and issued any licensure or certification that may be required in the civilian workforce; and making the Montgomery GI Bill eligibility available to pay for all necessary civilian license and certification examination requirements, including the necessary preparatory courses; and to support the efforts to increase the civilian labor market’s acceptance of the occupational training provided by the military.

A concern of The American Legion is that Veterans’ Service Organizations (VSOs) be adequately accounted for on any establishment of a Veterans Advisory Committee on Certification, Credentialing, and Licensure. The American Legion suggests that approximately half of the committee be made up of VSO representation.

A Proposed Amendment to H.R. 3082, the “Veteran-Owned Small Business Promotion Act of 2005”

The proposed amendment to H.R. 3082, the “Veteran-Owned Small Business Promotion Act of 2005” changes the bill striking all after the enacting clause and inserting a revised version of the bill that may be cited as the “Veteran-Owned Small Business Promotion Act of 2006.” The amendment eliminates minimum goals for contract awards for veterans and replaces it with a goal to be determined by the Secretary. It also adds “Enforcement Penalties for Misrepresentation.” This would bar any small business concern from contracting with the Department for five years. The amendment also adds language that concerns issues of change in ownership or control of a business, priority for contracting preferences, and oversight in the form of a Comptroller General Report Study.

The American Legion views small businesses as the backbone of the American economy. It is the driving force behind America’s past economic growth and will continue to be the major factor as we move further into the 21st century. Presently, more than nine out of every ten businesses are small firms, which produce almost one-half of the Gross National Product. Veterans’ benefits have always included assistance in creating and operating veteran-owned small businesses.

The American Legion still supports the original bill H.R. 3082 that requires that 9 percent of procurement contracts entered into by the Department of Veterans Affairs be awarded to small business concerns owned by veterans. We are very concerned about the elimination of

minimum goals and any other measures that might hinder contracting opportunities for veteran owned businesses. The American Legion supports certain provisions of this proposed legislation, however there needs to be a federal wide national procurement policy in conjunction with P.L.106-50.

Conclusion

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for allowing The American Legion to provide written comments on these measures. As always, The American Legion welcomes the opportunity to work closely with you and your colleagues on enactment of legislation that is in the best interest of America's veterans and their families.