

As Vice Chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, Gus chaired a hearing on June 19 examining the Department of Veterans Affairs disability claims backlog.

During the hearing, Gus also addressed a problem with the Veterans Retraining Assistance Program (VRAP), which is meant to provide one year of training and education benefits to certain unemployed veterans.

Watch his opening statement here and read more below:

ARMY TIMES: Problem arises for vets job training program

By Rick Maze

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<http://bit.ly/PlerZf>

A problem has arisen for a veterans' training program expected to launch July 1: Classes at community colleges in 18 states and territories will not be covered because those schools also provide bachelors' degrees.

The Veterans Retraining Assistance Program, created by Congress to provide one year of training and education benefits to certain unemployed veterans to prepare them for work in high-demand fields, was to be limited to short courses that could yield big results.

However, "using VA's narrow definition of 'community college,' if a school awarded one bachelor's degree along with hundreds or even thousands of associate degrees, that school would not qualify for VRAP training," said Rep. Gus Bilirakis, R-Fla., the second ranking Republican on the House Veterans' Affairs Committee.

Bilirakis said some community colleges are allowed by state law to provide a small number of four-year degrees. For example, 23 of Florida's 28 community colleges are not eligible for VRAP, the chancellor of the Florida College System has warned.

"The reason given for this denial is that each of those 23 community colleges awards a very limited number of bachelors' degrees, most often in technical and health care fields, such as a bachelor of nursing degree," Bilirakis said.

VA's definition of "community college" ignores what would help veterans, he said. "It is like saying that a bank that offers coffee to its patrons is no longer a bank and is now a Starbucks."

In addition to Florida, Bilirakis said classes at community colleges in Arizona, Georgia, Hawaii, Indiana, Kansas, Nevada, New York, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Washington and Wisconsin may not be covered by the program, according to the American Association of Community Colleges, because they award or are authorized to award bachelors' degrees.

The Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities has raised a similar issue with VA, noting that an unemployed veteran in West Virginia was denied coverage under the new program because VA ruled that the school he wanted to attend, National College, did not meet the VRAP criteria. In that case, the school was listed as approved for coverage under VRAP on one VA list but still was denied, said Suzanne Palmer, the association's government relations director.

VRAP is aimed at unemployed veterans aged 35 to 60 who have exhausted their veterans' education benefits and are looking for help to learn a new skill. Congress funded the program to help 45,000 students this year and 54,000 next year by giving them 12 additional months of Montgomery GI Bill education benefits.

Bilirakis said it will be hard to fill all of the slots if so many community colleges are not covered, and he asked VA to reconsider its criteria.