

Representative Gus Bilirakis

March 25, 2014

Statement for Economic Opportunity Legislative Hearing on H.R. 4151<sup>1</sup>

Thank you Mr. Chairman for holding this legislative hearing, and I appreciate the opportunity to speak on my bill, H.R. 4151, the GI Bill Survey Act. Members of this Committee understand the many challenges our veterans have in transitioning into civilian life after service to our great nation. America has always been the land of opportunity, and it is our responsibility that our veterans are equipped with the necessary resources to pursue that happiness. The brave men and women in our military services have answered the call to protect the liberties we are entitled to; likewise, we must answer the call for our veterans.

Through the GI Bill, veterans can utilize these benefits to cover tuition, housing, books and supplies, testing and certification fees, and other education-related expenditures. Since the enactment of the Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, over one million of our nation's veterans have participated in this program. By FY 2011, the Post/911 GI Bill had the largest number of participants and highest total obligations when compared to previous GI Bills since 1984. The VA provided nearly \$10 billion for that fiscal year in education benefits for veterans and beneficiaries, with the majority of these benefits applied to the Post 9/11 GI Bill program.

One of the biggest problems we continue to encounter when discussing the GI Bill is the lack of data available regarding its participants. This goes beyond simply performance and outcome measures, but also includes basic demographic information. In May 2013, the Government Accountability Office, the - (GAO) - conducted a study on the challenges student veterans face pursuing higher education and the obstacles regarding VA's management on the program that also affect veterans' academic success.

The GAO reported the following:

- "It is unclear the extent to which veterans are achieving successful academic outcomes, and VA lacks a plan for using student outcomes data from its new data collection efforts to improve its education programs."
- "Current data on student veterans are outdated or incomplete."

The GAO recommended the VA to create a plan to use new data on student outcomes to improve program management. The VA agreed with the recommendations and noted a number of actions it was taking to address these issues. Although that is progress, this

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<sup>1</sup> As prepared

Committee has not received any information regarding their efforts or progress on this initiative. Without objection from the Chairman, I would like to submit the summary of the GAO report for the record.

To safeguard this important resource and to ensure our nation's veterans that their success into civilian life is a top priority of ours, I have introduced H.R. 4151, the GI Bill Survey Act. This comprehensive study would encompass several elements to better understand the effectiveness of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), and what improvements can be made to VA education benefits.

The first step in making positive changes to a program is to fully understand its benefits and drawbacks. H.R. 4151 would require the Secretary of VA to contract with a third party entity to conduct a survey of GI Bill users. The survey would be a comprehensive study of veterans' experiences when using their education benefits. The survey would prove beneficial to both the VA and Congress by providing a better understanding of a veterans' experience from the processing end of VA to their experiences with the school certifying official, and how their education benefits and this program have benefitted them.

I appreciate the support for H.R. 4151, by the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), and the Student Veterans of America (SVA) who came to testify before this committee, as well as the support of The Association of Private Sector Colleges, Wounded Warrior Program (WWP), and VetsFirst that all submitted their testimonies for the record.

I encourage my colleagues on this committee to support this bi-partisan legislation. I hope we can come together to keep our promise to our veterans and ensure that the men and women who dedicated their lives to serving our nation have the viable resources to successfully transition into civilian life. Thank you again and I yield back.