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STATEMENT OF  
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NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE SERVICE  
VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES

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

WITH RESPECT TO

*Status of Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Programs*

WASHINGTON, DC

May 6, 2010

MADAM CHAIRWOMAN, RANKING MEMBER BOOZMAN, AND MEMBERS OF THIS COMMITTEE:

On behalf of the 2.1 million members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States and our Auxiliaries, the VFW would like to thank this committee for the opportunity to present its views on this very timely issue.

The VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Education (VR&E) program is first and foremost an employment program. We must consider how a VR&E program of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will best serve the influx of service-disabled veterans by preparing them sustainable careers. The current economic downturn is creating new challenges for injured veterans and to VR&E. We must have career-focused programs that focus on the ever-changing needs of service-connected disabled veterans.

Simply put, VR&E needs to be flexible in providing the training (and in some cases retraining) and education necessary to allow disabled veterans to achieve their short and long-term career goals. Conversely, VR&E also needs to be adaptable in assisting disabled veterans to overcome the obstacles created by changing job markets – brought on by corporate downsizing, small business closures and economic uncertainty. To be truly effective, the program must be focused on a goal of avoiding disability-related unemployment later in life.

This generation of injured veterans is unique in that they survived injuries that just a generation ago would have been fatal. Regardless of the severity of injury, the VR&E program of the future must adapt to their needs, give them every opportunity to succeed both personally and professionally, with the highest level of independence possible.

**VR&E BRIEF OVERVIEW**

The sole purpose of the Veterans Benefits Administration's VR&E program, as authorized under Chapter 31 of 38 USC, is to provide comprehensive services to address the employment handicaps of service-connected disabled veterans in an effort to achieve maximum independence in daily living, and to obtain and maintain gainful employment. Furthermore, VR&E provides services to severely disabled veterans with a focus on helping them achieve the highest quality of life possible, including future employment when feasible.

In 1918, Congress passed the Vocational Rehabilitation Act to increase the probability for a seamless transition into suitable employment that is consistent with a qualifying veteran's competencies and interests through

successful rehabilitation. This program was administered by the Federal Board for Vocational Education. On August 24, 1921, VR&E was transferred to the soon-to-be created Department of Veterans Affairs. Legislation would later expand VR&E, specifying that any eligible veteran may receive up to four years of training specifically directed to rehabilitation and the restoration of employability.

VR&E eligibility is based on a veteran being separated with a higher than dishonorable discharge rating; have a disability rating of 10 percent or more; and be in need of vocational rehabilitation to overcome employment handicaps caused by such service-connected disability. A veteran is eligible for maximum of 48 months of education entitlement (any of which may be used in VR&E), and the program must be completed within 12 years from the date of disability rating notification from VA, with an exception for those with a serious employment handicap.

The process begins when a case manager is assigned to the veteran. The case manager works with a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (VRC) to determine the extent of a disabled veteran's employment handicap(s). A rehabilitation plan is developed by the VRC and the veteran outlining goals of the VR&E program and the means they will be achieved. The VRC and the case manager then help the veteran for up to 18 months through ongoing case management to achieve the goals of the agreed upon written plan for employment or independent living. Services provided include, but are not limited to, referrals for medical and dental services, coordination of training allowances, education counseling for children and spouses of veterans who have a permanent and total service-connected disability, testing for aptitude, and tutorial assistance.

Under the current VR&E program, a veteran whose eligibility and entitlement have been established must not only complete the rehabilitation plan, but he or she will also be tracked to attainment of suitable employment based on the plan's goals. This is called the "Five-Track Service Delivery System." The five tracks are:

1. Re-employment: Helps veterans and members of the National Guard and the Reserves return to jobs held prior to active duty.
2. Rapid Access to Employment: Emphasizes the goal of immediate employment, and is available to those who already have the skills to compete in the job market in appropriate occupations.
3. Self-Employment: For veterans who have limited access to traditional employment, who need flexible work schedules or a more accommodating work environment because of their disabling conditions or other special circumstances.
4. Employment through Long-Term Services. Assists veterans who need specialized training or education to obtain and maintain suitable employment.
5. Independent Living Services. For veterans who may not be able to work immediately, and may need additional rehabilitation to enable them to live more independently.

From its inception, VR&E has adapted to better reflect veterans' current circumstances. For example, we applaud this subcommittee for increasing the cap on the number of veterans eligible for the Independent Living track.

How "successful rehabilitation" is defined has evolved, too. Before 1980, completion of a training program for suitable employment and not actual job placement was considered a success. This was identified as a problem area and has been improved. Furthermore, in partnership with the Department of Labor, employers, and other relevant federal agencies have made increased employment opportunities for program participants. Finally, outreach and early intervention efforts have been expanded and integrated into the U.S. Army Wounded Warrior Program, the Marine Wounded Warrior Battalion, the Navy's Safe Harbor program, and the Air Force Wounded Warrior commands.

## VFW's VISION FOR VR&E

With the advent of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, hundreds of thousands of veterans are currently improving their career trajectory through education. Their success is a direct result of Congress's decisive action to completely overhaul the GI Bill. That same congressional attention is needed for other veterans' training and education programs.

**The VFW envisions a VR&E for Life program**, one that adapts to the changing needs of the employment market and the evolving nature of the individual veteran's disability. Our nation's obligation to disabled veterans is unparalleled. Our veterans have lifelong injuries and disabilities; so, too, should their access be to valuable training and education programs that will allow them to achieve higher levels of independence, self-confidence and life-long career opportunities.

- ***Remove the Delimiting Date for VR&E.*** Currently, the delimiting date for VR&E is set to 12 years after military separation or 12 years following the date of rating for a service-connected disability. Eliminating VR&E's delimiting date would allow veterans to access it on a needs basis for the entirety of their employable lives, thus allowing retraining when necessary and lifelong access to VR&E employment services.
- ***Increase VR&E's Educational Stipend to Reflect Chapter 33.*** Chapter 33 provides a far more equitable living stipend that reflects the real world costs. VR&E falls dramatically short of aiding veterans with the real costs of living. For this reason, the VFW strongly urges Congress to create a cost of living stipend that mirrors the Chapter 33 stipend, which reflects the basic allowance for housing of an E-5 with dependents rate, based on zip code.
- ***Additional Assistance for Veterans with Dependents under VR&E.*** The VR&E educational track provides insufficient support for many veterans with dependents. Many seriously disabled veterans are unable to pursue education or training options due to limited resources and the immediate need to support their families. The VFW calls on Congress to create a viable VR&E program to provide childcare services to those veterans pursuing education and training.
- ***Jump Start VR&E Enrollment.*** It can take months from the date a veteran files for services under VR&E until he or she enters into a training or education program. This is because VR&E requires validation of entitlement, skill and interest assessment of the veteran, and then authorization of the training or education program. The VFW believes entrance into training or education should be implicit once a veteran is deemed eligible. The skill and interest assessment should serve solely to help a veteran better focus their efforts, not as a pre-qualifier.
- ***Measure Veterans Long-Term Employment Under VR&E.*** Currently, the measure of success is the number of veterans gainfully employed for a period of 60 days after completing a VR&E program. Such a short-term measurement limits the VR&E program to short-term goals instead of properly helping disabled veterans succeed for life. The VFW urges Congress to redefine the VR&E program's goals to focus on the long-term. It should be tracked if a disabled veterans becomes unemployed at any point over their career. If the measure of success was based on long-term employability, then VR&E placement officials will give more credence to career options vice 60 days of employment.

Madam Chairwoman, this concludes my testimony. I will be pleased to respond to any questions you or the members of your committee may have. Thank you.