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**STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SEPTEMBER 21, 2021**

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting DAV (Disabled American Veterans) to testify at today's legislative hearing of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity to consider multiple bills important to our nation's service-disabled veterans.

Discussion Draft, to prohibit the use of entitlement to educational assistance under the Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance Program for secondary school education

This legislation would prohibit those who are eligible for Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Survivors' and Dependents Educational Assistance Program (Chapter 35) from using their entitlement for a high school education. Currently, a child or spouse of an eligible veteran can access this benefit while attending secondary school, which will be withdrawn from the overall 36-month entitlement amount.

DAV does not have a resolution specific to this issue; however, we believe this legislation would preserve the intent of the program which is to provide educational assistance leading to a degree pursued at an institution of higher learning.

Draft bill, to ensure that the Secretary of Veterans Affairs repays members of the Armed Forces for certain contributions made by such members towards Post-9/11 Educational Assistance

Department of Defense statistics from 2017 show that 70% of new service members still pay \$1,200 to keep their Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) eligibility, even though a significant majority later opt to use the free and more robust Post-9/11 GI Bill. As the law is currently written, veterans who have fully exhausted their MGIB or Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits are eligible to have their \$1,200 refunded if they previously signed up for MGIB. However, active duty service members who exhaust their MGIB are not being refunded their \$1,200 because current law ties the refund payment to the final Post-9/11 GI Bill monthly stipend payment, which they do not receive. This bill would ensure all eligible service members and veterans will get their full refund.

DAV does not have a resolution specific to this issue and takes no position on this bill.

Discussion Draft, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to submit to Congress a report on the shallow subsidy program under the supportive services for veteran families program

The Shallow Subsidy initiative is a program under VA's Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program. Shallow subsidies provide rental assistance to veterans who are enrolled in SSVF's Rapid Re-housing or Homeless Prevention services, yet remain rent-burdened and require the longer-term assistance to maintain permanent housing. This benefit helps very low-income veteran households—those with incomes under 50% of the area median income—avoid the trauma and cost of literal homelessness and provides a new set of interventions aimed at helping veterans overcome the lack of affordable housing and general unavailability of housing units, particularly in high rent markets. Shallow subsidies are currently available to veterans in 11 U.S. communities that are characterized by high costs, low availability of affordable housing and high rates of homelessness, such as Los Angeles, New York City, Cook County, Illinois and Washington, D.C.

The legislation under consideration would direct the VA Secretary to submit a report to Congress on the shallow subsidy program. This report would include, among other data, the number of veterans and families served under the program, disaggregated by race and ethnicity, gender, geographic location and age; a description of the support provided to special populations, including elderly veterans, minority veterans, women veterans, children of veterans, disabled veterans and veterans transitioning from certain institutions; an assessment of whether it is feasible and beneficial to expand the program nationally; and an assessment of whether increasing the payment rate under the program is necessary.

DAV supports this legislation in accordance with Resolution No. 119, which supports funding for the Supportive Services for Veterans Families program to ensure prevention of homelessness among veterans and their families.

Discussion Draft, to expand eligibility for the Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry Scholarship to include spouses and children of individuals who die from a service-connected disability within 120 days of serving in the Armed Forces

This legislation would extend eligibility for the Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry Scholarship to the spouses and children of individuals who die from a service-connected disability within the first 120 days after leaving the Armed Forces. Currently, only surviving children or spouses of those who died during active duty, on or after September 11, 2001, are eligible for this scholarship.

DAV supports this bill in accordance with Resolution No. 174, which supports legislation that would improve educational benefits to service-disabled veterans and their survivors.

Draft bill, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out a pilot program to improve public transportation services for veterans

This draft bill would direct the VA Secretary to establish a pilot program to assess the feasibility and advisability of awarding grants to eligible entities to improve public transportation services for veterans specific to facilities and organizations that serve them.

The eligible entities are defined as any state, tribal, county, or city government that is providing public transportation services as of the date on which the pilot program commences; or has a proven ability and intention to establish public transportation infrastructure. Each application for the grant must contain a description of the public transportation services that the entity intends to provide, a list of all sites accessed by the public transportation services, the schedule of such services, a list of the locations of facilities and organizations that serve veterans and an estimate of the number of veterans that would use such services. Additionally, the bill requires reporting to Congress within one year of the first grant award.

Numerous reports have indicated that an inability to access VA services can have a detrimental impact on veterans' overall health outcomes. DAV believes that service-disabled veterans should have ease of access to VA medical centers, VA regional offices and other VA facilities and organizations providing services specific to veterans. Hence, DAV supports this draft legislation in accordance with Resolution No. 263, which calls for VA to operate an effective and efficient transportation program for all service-connected veterans and to simplify access to transportation benefits.

Discussion Draft, to make adjustment of grants awarded by the Secretary of VA for comprehensive service programs to serve homeless veterans

The draft legislation under consideration would make permanent the temporary modification of VA grant requirements for comprehensive homeless service programs which eliminated the "matching funding requirement" authorized under Public Law No: 116-136 the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act or the CARES Act and Public Law No: 116-315, the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act.

Prior to this adjustment, many VA grantees would struggle to come up with funds, or take funds from other programs to meet the matching requirements. This heavily discouraged many organizations from applying for the grant. The temporary removal of this requirement allowed more organizations to apply, provided organizations with the funding flexibility to provide adequate services to unhoused veterans and

reduced the financial burden of renovation of shelters to prevent or reduce the spread of COVID-19 and other contagious illnesses. By permanently eliminating the matching requirement, Congress can prevent VA grantees from returning to pre-COVID program occupancy levels, or even ending its shelter programs altogether. For these reasons, DAV strongly supports this legislation in accordance with Resolution No. 119, which supports legislation to maintain sufficient resources and improve VA's programs and services to eliminate veteran homelessness.

Discussion Draft, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out a pilot program on grants for care for elderly homeless veterans

This discussion draft would require the VA Secretary to carry out a pilot program on grants for care for elderly homeless veterans. The bill seeks to address an important subpopulation of homeless veterans with unique challenges and needs and would require the Secretary to develop a grant program to provide transitional housing for elderly homeless veterans in at least five locations. Program grantees must provide nursing support to veterans who require assistance with activities of daily living and those with medical conditions that require consistent support or supervision.

Research shows that about half of homeless individuals are more than 50 years old.¹ Sadly, many of these individuals have been securely housed until they became older—about 44% of elderly homeless individuals became homeless later in life.² Additionally, harsh living conditions, including food instability and lack of access to regular health care, cause homeless individuals to age beyond their years—leading to mortality rates that are about four times as high as same-aged peers in the general population.³ Homelessness can also exacerbate chronic health conditions, which may have contributed to their homelessness or cause additional chronic health conditions to emerge.

Aging individuals, including veterans, who may have been able to subsist on low wages from manual labor, become increasingly at risk as their physical ability to perform this work declines.⁴ Veterans also have service-connected conditions that may hasten declines or impede their ability to participate in competitive employment over a sustained time period. Physical disabilities common in the veteran population, such as chronic post-traumatic stress (including residual effects of military sexual assault), traumatic brain injuries and other mental health conditions including drug and alcohol

¹ Center for Elders' Independence website. <https://cei.elders.org/the-aging-homeless-population-brings-unique-challenges/> Accessed August 24, 2021.

² Simmons University website. Aging on the Streets: America's Growing Older Homeless Population. <https://online.simmons.edu/blog/aging-on-the-streets-americas-growing-older-homeless-population/> Accessed August 24, 2021.

³ Simmons University website. Aging on the Streets: America's Growing Older Homeless Population. <https://online.simmons.edu/blog/aging-on-the-streets-americas-growing-older-homeless-population/> Accessed August 24, 2021.

⁴ **Simmons University website. Aging on the Streets: America's Growing Older Homeless Population.** <https://online.simmons.edu/blog/aging-on-the-streets-americas-growing-older-homeless-population/> Accessed August 24, 2021.

substance use disorders often contribute to homelessness among veterans, and untreated, may worsen over time.

Many programs, including most of VA's homeless grant and per diem providers, address the needs of younger veterans who may be able to re-engage in employment. Older veterans may have different needs including for long-term rental assistance, family reconciliation, or more intensive and ongoing support.⁵ Many are at risk for falls, visual and memory impairment and incontinence decades ahead of same-age peers.

DAV Resolution No. 119 calls for support of sustained and sufficient funding to improve programs for homeless veterans. We support this discussion draft in accordance with this resolution.

Discussion Draft, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out a pilot program on substance and alcohol use disorder recovery for homeless veterans

This discussion draft would require the VA Secretary to develop a five-year pilot program to provide or coordinate substance use disorder (SUD) recovery services for veterans who are homeless, recently housed, or at risk of becoming homeless. The bill would require grant applicants to identify the types of services they would provide or coordinate and experience they have in addressing this service provision or coordination along with describing managerial competencies. Those selected would also have to document experience working with veterans or individuals from the armed services and hold appropriate state accreditation. Grantees would be required to collect data on veterans' satisfaction with services, their health status and mental health wellness in addition to the number of veterans who are still using substances within 180 days and homeless or at risk of homelessness within a year of receiving services. This data would be compared to data from other types of treatment provided by VA.

The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans states that up to 70% of homeless veterans have substance use problems.⁶ While VA studies identify lower percentages of veterans with SUD, it is clear that these disorders increase the risk of homelessness for veterans and also the risk of adverse outcomes for veterans who are homeless. About half of homeless veterans indicate that they have both SUDs and other mental health conditions.⁷ They use more emergency care and inpatient care, but less primary care and preventive services than housed veterans with similar chronic conditions.⁸ Homeless veterans are also more likely to have conditions—including conditions related

⁵ "The Emerging Crisis of Aged Homelessness: What Can Be Done To Help?," Health Affairs Blog, February 27, 2020. DOI: 10.1377/hblog20200226.712105
<https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hblog20200226.712105/full/> accessed August 24, 2021.

⁶ <https://nchv.org/veteran-homelessness/>

⁷ Cox, Koriann, Malte, Carol & Saxon, Andrew. Characteristics and service utilization of homeless veterans entering VA substance use treatment. *Psychological Services*. 207, Vol. 14. No. 2, 208-213.
https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/nchav/docs/Cox_CharacteristicsServiceUtilizationHomelessVeteransEnteringVA.pdf

⁸ Cox et al.

to military service—that may have caused or exacerbated their use of substances including traumatic brain injury, psychotic disorders, adjustment and mood disorders, anxiety disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder.⁹

While VA has programs for treating substance use disorders, recent years have seen resources for these program, at best, remain stable while need for services increases. Most of VA’s SUD programs are not exclusively focused on homeless veterans and the unique issues associated with this population, but rather on recovery for any veteran with a substance use disorder. For the homeless veteran population, trying to address a SUD is frequently complicated by a service-related condition, lack of a solid support system, and financial instability in addition to the lack of stable housing.

DAV supports this draft bill in accordance with Resolution No.117, which calls for legislation to improve substance use disorder treatment for veterans and Resolution No.119, which calls for dedicated resources to improve programming and services for homeless veterans.

Discussion Draft, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide technical assistance to recipients of grants for supportive services for very low-income families in permanent housing and comprehensive service programs

This discussion draft would require the VA to provide training and technical assistance regarding planning, development and provision of services to VA grantees who provide comprehensive service programs and those who provide supportive services to very low-income families in permanent housing. This would ease homeless grant and per diem providers’ administrative responsibilities so they may more efficiently provide high-quality services to veterans and their families.

We are pleased to support this legislation in accordance with DAV Resolution No. 119, which supports legislation to maintain and improve VA’s programs and services to eliminate veteran homelessness.

Draft bill, to adjust the rate of per diem payments provided by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to grantees that provide services to homeless veterans

Section 2012 of title 38, United States Code, directs the VA to provide per diem payments to grant recipients for services provided to homeless veterans. The VA may adjust the rate of per diem payments as the Secretary considers appropriate; however, any adjustment made may not result in a rate that exceeds 115% of the rate authorized for State Veterans Homes for domiciliary care under section 1741 of title 38, United States Code, or 150% for services provided to a homeless veteran who is placed in housing that will become permanent. This discussion draft would raise those funding ceilings from 115% to 200% and from 150% to 200% of the rate authorized for State Veterans Homes for domiciliary care, respectively.

⁹ Perl, Libby. Veterans and Homelessness. Congressional Research Service. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/RL34024.pdf>

In keeping with DAV Resolution No. 119, which supports legislation that provides sufficient funding to improve services for homeless veterans, we support this discussion draft.

Draft bill, to increase and extend the authorization of appropriations for homeless veterans reintegration programs

This legislation under consideration would increase and extend funding for the Department of Labor's (DOL) Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program. Section 2021 of Title 38, United States Code, directs the DOL Secretary, through the Assistant Secretary of Labor for Veterans' Employment and Training, "to conduct, either directly or through grant or contract, such programs as the Secretary determines appropriate to provide job training, counseling, and placement services to expedite the reintegration of homeless veterans into the labor force." Since 1988, DOL has used this authorization to administer the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP), a competitive grant program focused exclusively on competitive employment for homeless veterans. All HVRPs offer job counseling, resume preparation, job placement, and follow-up at 30-, 90- and 180-day intervals. Program staff also ensure that participants receive essential supportive services such as clothing, shelter, referral for medical services or substance use disorder treatment, and transportation assistance.

This legislation would increase the authorization for this program to \$75 million per year until 2025. In accordance with DAV Resolution No. 119, which specifically urges Congress to fund the DOL Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program, DAV supports this legislation. However, we note that additional funding may be needed. Employment services are still in high demand for unemployed veterans. In fact, VA's Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program or VRRAP is on pace to max out its funding before it achieves its 17,250-participant mark. We believe that an effective program such as HVRP will likely need to expand to address the growing demand.

Draft bill, to extend the delimiting period for certain individuals to use educational assistance benefits administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs

In April 2021, the VA announced a change to its interpretation of the "48-month rule." This change restored entitlement to those who utilized its Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment benefit prior to using their GI Bill benefit. However, approximately 2,600 veterans have fewer months until their delimiting date than the number of entitlement months that VA restored. This bill would extend the delimiting date for the benefit by the same number of months of restored entitlement plus an additional six months.

DAV supports this legislation in accordance with Resolution No. 272, which supports the adoption of programs and legislation to remove barriers for service-disabled veterans' continued education and employment.

Draft bill, to amend the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act to establish protections under that Act for a member of the Armed Forces who leaves a course of education, paid for with certain educational assistance, to perform certain service

This legislation would amend the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act to create protections for members of the armed services who withdraw from an education program to enter a period of military service. This bill would prohibit an institution from the assignment of a failing grade, reduction of grade point average, creation of any unexcused absences, or assessment of any financial penalties to covered service members.

DAV does not have a resolution specific to this issue and takes no position on the bill.

Discussion Draft, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to report on the Warrior Training Advancement Course of the Veterans Benefits Administration

This draft bill would direct the VA to provide an annual report on the Warrior Training Advancement Course (WARTAC). This course is a skill-bridge education and employment opportunity for wounded warriors and transitioning service members to complete a national level Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) training program while still on active duty. Successful completion of this training program leads to an opportunity for service members to be interviewed and hired at one of VBA's 56 regional offices around the country as a Veteran Service Representative.

DAV supports this legislation in accordance with Resolution No. 128, which urges Congress to monitor the review of transition programs to include: workshops, training methodology, delivery of services and the collection and analysis of course critiques.

Discussion Draft, to extend eligibility for a certain work-study allowance paid by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to certain individuals who pursue programs of rehabilitation, education, or training on at least a half-time basis

This legislation would extend eligibility for the VA's work-study program by allowing those who are enrolled at least half-time for a college degree, vocational, or professional program to take part in the program. Currently, a veteran who is pursuing a program of rehabilitation, education, or training under Chapters 30, 31, 32, 33 or 34 has to be enrolled at least three-quarter time for eligibility. This legislation would open the program to service-disabled veterans who, due to their disabilities or other factors, could not enroll in three-quarter time.

DAV supports this legislation in accordance with Resolution No. 272, which supports the adoption of programs and legislation to remove barriers to a service-disabled veteran's continued education and employment.

Discussion Draft, to eliminate the Freddie Mac conforming loan limitation for loans made to veterans with remaining guaranty or insurance loan entitlement

This draft bill would remove the conforming loan limitation for loans made to veterans with remaining VA Guaranty or Insurance Loan entitlement and would also allow up to two concurrent uses of the program. Currently, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac are restricted by law to purchasing single-family mortgages with origination balances below a specific amount, known as the “conforming loan limit.”

DAV does not have a resolution specific to this issue and takes no position on the bill. However, we would like to share our concern with the last section of this legislation that discusses the new fee waiver. This provision would preserve the fee exemption for service-disabled veterans and veteran survivors on initial and subsequent loans, but would create a non-waivable fee for concurrent loans. DAV opposes the imposition of fees on service-disabled veterans or their survivors who are attempting to utilize the VA home loan program.

Discussion Draft, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to pay to certain veterans, who receive certain educational assistance furnished by the Secretary, a weekly stipend for child care services

This bill would provide a weekly \$100 stipend for child care services to veterans who are utilizing their educational benefits under the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Currently, child care assistance or services are not provided to veterans who are going through employment or educational programs offered by the VA.

This proposed stipend for child care assistance would remove a major obstacle for many veterans while vastly improving their ability to access needed health care treatment and successfully complete rehabilitative and educational programs. We support this legislation in accordance with DAV Resolution No. 044; however, we request the Subcommittee amend the bill to include veterans who are enrolled in Chapter 35, Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E), and various homeless training programs as well, as these veterans have also shown the need for child care assistance to attend and complete VA programs.

H.R. 4874, the Fly Vets Act

This legislation would place a cap on the amount of tuition and fees that may be paid under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, in which a public institution of higher learning enters into an agreement with a private entity to provide such education, for example with flight training schools.

DAV does not have a resolution specific to this issue and takes no position on this bill.

H.R. 5151, the Col. James Floyd Turner IV U.S.M.C. GI Bill Transfer Act of 2021

This legislation would allow for the transfer of educational assistance under the Post-9/11 GI Bill to an eligible dependent after approval of transfer but prior to transferring all of such entitlement. The VA would be required to transfer entitlement of the service member or veteran, distributing it evenly between all such transferees.

DAV does not have a resolution specific to this issue and takes no position on the bill.

Again, thank you for inviting DAV to testify at this legislative hearing. I am happy to address any questions you or any member of the Subcommittee may have for DAV.