



Statement before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity on H.R. 2409; H.R. 5452; H.R. 5644; H.R.
5649; and a draft bill titled, "To Amend the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act to provide
for the termination by a spouse of a lessee of certain leases when the lessee dies while in
military service."

Empowering Veterans in Civilianhood: Reshaping the Narrative Through the VET OPP Act

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Chairman Arrington, Ranking Member O'Rourke, and distinguished members of this
subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear here today, as you consider tangible measures to
uplift our nation's veterans in their transition from war to work and successful civilian
lives. It is an honor.

**Veterans are the unacknowledged permanent ambassadors of national service. How we
publicly portray veterans directly relates to how society conceptualizes military service,**

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including what happens to an individual during that service. In an all-volunteer force, reputation is key to the attractiveness of joining a profession that can end in death or permanent disability.

To encourage young men and women to join its ranks, the Department of Defense relies heavily on programs and benefits provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Those who choose to wear the nation's uniform, as well as those who choose not to, are influenced by how well Congress and the VA care for veterans' post-service reputations and for their physical bodies.

The types of legislation that Congress passes, and the programs and benefits the VA prioritizes, powerfully shape the veteran narrative. Crucially, it influences veterans' own perceptions of their identity and worth in the post-service context.

From Citizen-Soldiers to Soldiers-Citizens: Creating Identity

The proposed Veterans' Education, Transition, and Opportunity Prioritization Plan Act of 2018, or VET OPP Act, reflects how veterans grow their post-service civilian identity in a whole-health manner. It recognizes that having a fourth high-level, prominent institutional VA mechanism—a Veterans' Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration, headed by its own under secretary—can light the pathway to success for post-service veterans, similarly to how Department of Defense mechanisms involving training, sense of purpose, and a shared community shape young civilians into successful soldiers.

Currently, approximately half (50.3 percent) of active-duty enlisted personnel are 25 years old or younger. Somewhat fewer (43.8 percent) of the entire military force are in that age bracket.ⁱ Developmentally speaking, this is the “emerging adulthood” period—a period of rapid development involving key struggles surrounding personal identity. The military offers concrete answers to common existential questions, reinforcing them through experience, during this normative period.

The positive self-regard cultivated during military service becomes a focal point of the psychological changes that often distinguish the period of transition out of the military. Research from Columbia University reveals that veterans experience grief-like symptoms at the loss of their previous military identity which in turn augments all the stressors of a life transition, when facing the initial instability of civilian life and lacking the order and purpose that characterized their service.ⁱⁱ

The media and the public overwhelmingly call this experience of veteran transition stress PTSD and erroneously believe that the majority of all post-9/11 veterans have a mental health disorder. Unfortunately, since funded research at VAs and military treatment facilities prioritizes PTSD research, and since the preponderance of well-intentioned veteran legislation post-9/11 emphasizes mental health disorders, the public, potential employers, and veterans themselves are trapped in the inaccurate and harmful “broken veteran” narrative cycle.ⁱⁱⁱ

Identity, Education, and Employment: Pathway to Veteran Success

Currently, over half of employers believe that veterans do not have successful careers after leaving the military. Half do not think that veterans pursue a college or vocational school degree, but 62 percent believe veterans need to acquire more hard and soft skills before they are ready for nonmilitary roles.^{iv} Veterans themselves tend to agree that they need “soft” or communication skills. Both veterans and employers nearly unanimously agree on the benefit of internship or apprenticeship programs for veterans as they seek to reenter the civilian workforce. And post-9/11 veterans especially see education as crucial to their continued success.

The VA currently has a suite of educational assistance, vocational rehabilitation and employment, and education and career counseling programs, as well as a broadly defined shared transition assistance program (with the Departments of Labor, Defense, and Homeland Security), which make accessible all the tools veterans need to progress from war to work. But these are at the bottom of the totem pole within the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). The VA’s nearly century-old structural design impedes its own ability to help veterans achieve that success. Its outdated manufacturing-economy outlook, which informs VBA’s 1917-based disability model, sees a service-connected condition only through the terms of a permanent earnings loss and works as a perverse incentive against veterans entering the workforce. With all of the VBA’s energies directed toward its backlog of nearly half a million disability claims, its institutional resources are concentrated on the disability system to the unsurprising neglect of its education and economic programs. One small example: If you visit the VA’s Office of Employment and Economic Impact website, within VBA, it tells you that “it is no longer available” and to maybe check out the Department of Labor. Coincidentally, a majority of veterans report that navigating the VA’s administrations and benefits is their top challenge in transition to civilian life.^v

The very VA economic opportunity programs veterans stand most to profit by are operating with the proverbial millstone around their necks.

Conclusion

In the 21st century information age, education *is* key to employment, and employment is the door to a successful transition to civilian life. Education and employment combined give veterans the crucial tools to reforge civilian identities stronger even than their military ones. The psychic rewards of work, productivity, and a career cannot be underestimated, which is corroborated by the *true* veteran narrative: Veterans, it turns out, are immensely successful. Empirical data shore that up by showing how veterans with increased levels of education are wealthier, healthier, and more civically engaged than even their civilian peers over the life course. Additional research establishes the links between these outcomes and reduced rates of dependence, disability, and criminality.

This is the veteran narrative that should predominate. The goal of the nation’s veteran economic opportunity programs should be to enable soldiers to be fully functional members of society, animated by a strong civilian identity. As early as the Revolutionary War, General George Washington had felt intuitively that veterans needed to maintain a sense of self after military service, recommending in his Farewell Orders to the Armies of the United States that veterans funnel their energies as soon as possible into active pursuits

and “prove themselves not less virtuous and useful as Citizens, than they [were] persevering and victorious as soldiers.”

The VET OPP Act can trigger this shift, as Congress elevates and frees already existing VA economic opportunity and transition assistance programs through shifting them structurally into a fourth VA administration. Our nation ought to provide transitioning service members with the means and opportunity to succeed in their civilian lives and to invest their talent and ability in the American economy.

Thank you again for the honor of this opportunity. I look forward to answering any questions from the committee.

ⁱ Department of Defense, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy, “2015 Demographics: Profile of the Military Community,” <http://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2015-Demographics-Report.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ Meaghan C. Mobbs and George A. Bonanno, “Beyond War and PTSD: The Crucial Role of Transition Stress in the Lives of Military Veterans,” *Clinical Psychology Review* 59 (2018) 137–44.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rebecca Burgess, “Economic Opportunity, Transition Assistance, and the 21st Century Veteran: The Case for a Fourth VA Administration,” AEI, March 20, 2018, <http://www.aei.org/publication/economic-opportunity-transition-assistance-and-the-21st-century-veteran-the-case-for-a-fourth-va-administration/>.

^{iv} Edelman Insights, “2017 Veterans’ Well-Being Survey: Focus on Employment, Education, and Health,” October 2017, <https://www.slideshare.net/EdelmanInsights/2017-veterans-wellbeing-survey>.

^v Corri Zoli, Rosalinda Maury, and Daniel Fay, *Missing Perspectives: Servicemembers’ Transition from Service to Civilian Life*, Institute for Veterans and Military Families, Syracuse University, November 2015.