



July 2021

VETERANS WITH DISABILITIES

VA Could Better Inform Veterans with Disabilities about Their Education Benefit Options



A Century of Non-Partisan Fact-Based Work

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-450](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

VA offers education benefits to veterans with disabilities through the GI Bill, VA's largest education program, and VR&E, which helps veterans with service-connected disabilities re-enter the workforce. Each offers distinct features that may better serve veterans depending on their individual circumstances. However, veterans with disabilities may not know that VR&E can help pay for education as part of its employment services. GAO was asked to what extent eligible veterans are aware of the comparative features of the programs.

This report examines (1) the reported factors that influence whether veterans with disabilities select the Post-9/11 GI Bill or VR&E, and (2) how VA informs veterans with disabilities about the education benefits available to them from each program, and the effectiveness of those efforts.

For both programs, GAO reviewed relevant federal laws; analyzed participant data; conducted semi-structured interviews with officials from schools and VSOs selected for their depth of knowledge about veteran affairs, and reviewed relevant VA informational materials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making two recommendations to VA to take steps to 1) provide veterans with more information about VR&E's education benefits and 2) inform veterans about the comparative program features of the GI Bill and VR&E. VA concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-21-450](#). For more information, contact Elizabeth Curda at (202) 512-7215 or curdae@gao.gov.

July 2021

VETERANS WITH DISABILITIES

VA Could Better Inform Veterans with Disabilities about Their Education Benefit Options

What GAO Found

Most school and veteran service organization (VSO) officials GAO interviewed stated that when given the choice between the Post 9/11 GI Bill (GI Bill) and the Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) program, veterans with disabilities will base their choice on which program best suits their unique goals, preferences, and circumstances. For example, certain veterans may prefer the GI Bill's flexibility to independently select courses of study, whereas others may prefer to have the assistance of a counselor to select a course of study as part of an employment plan, as provided under VR&E. However, most officials GAO interviewed said veterans with disabilities often use the GI Bill for education benefits without knowing that the VR&E program exists, or that it can pay for education, provide assistive equipment for their disability, or offer unique benefits of working with a counselor.

Selected Comments Regarding the Post-9/11 GI Bill and Veteran Readiness & Employment Programs

"Had I known about VR&E I would have [used it.]"	-Veteran with disabilities
"I often think of VR&E as sort of a hidden program when it comes to education benefits."	-VSO official
"Veterans with disabilities are often not aware of the differences between the two programs."	-School official

Source: GAO survey of veterans and GAO interviews with school and VSO officials | GAO-21-450

VA provides information about education benefits to veterans with disabilities through various methods, including in-person communication, online materials, and written communications. However, on the agency website, VA.gov, few webpages devoted to VR&E explicitly mention that it can help pay for a college degree. In addition, the letters that VA sends to veterans when they receive their disability rating do not specifically mention that VR&E can cover education costs for a college degree. VA's online GI Bill Comparison Tool allows veterans to learn more about the tuition amounts each program will cover for certain schools, but it does not inform veterans on the key differences in program features across the programs. Most school and VSO officials GAO interviewed said VA's efforts do not adequately inform veterans with disabilities about their potential education benefit options, as evidenced by the number of veterans with disabilities they encounter who are unaware that VR&E exists or who do not fully understand the benefits VR&E can provide. Including more information about how VR&E can help veterans pay for higher education, and facilitating direct comparison between the features of the GI Bill and VR&E, would help better position veterans with disabilities to choose the program that best meets their needs.

Contents

Letter		1
	Background	4
	Selected Officials Reported That a Lack of Awareness of VR&E Can Prevent Veterans with Disabilities from Making an Informed Choice about Education Benefits	7
	VA De-emphasizes VR&E Education Benefits in the Information It Provides Veterans with Disabilities	9
	Conclusions	20
	Recommendations for Executive Action	21
	Agency Comments	21
Appendix I	Objectives, Scope, and Methodology	23
Appendix II	Comments from the Department of Veterans Affairs	26
Appendix III	GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments	29
Table		
	Table 1: Comparison of Selected Post-9/11 GI Bill and Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) Program Features	5
Figures		
	Figure 1: VA.gov Descriptions of the Post-9/11 GI Bill and Veteran Readiness and Employment Program	12
	Figure 2: eBenefits.gov Description of the Veteran Readiness and Employment program	13
	Figure 3: VA.gov GI Bill Comparison Tool	15
	Figure 4: VA.gov Online Side-by-side Comparison of the GI Bill and Veteran Employment through Technology Education Courses Programs	17
	Figure 5: Excerpts from Veteran Readiness and Employment Motivational Letter	19

Abbreviations

IAVA	Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
TAP	Transition Assistance Program
VA	Department of Veterans Affairs
VBA	Veterans Benefits Administration
VET TEC	Veteran Employment through Technology Education Courses
VR&E	Veteran Readiness and Employment
VSO	veteran service organization
VSOC	VetSuccess on Campus

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July 28, 2021

The Honorable Jon Tester
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Mark Takano
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
House of Representatives

As of August 2020, approximately 4.7 million veterans had a service-connected disability, making up about 26 percent of the total veteran population.¹ As these veterans transition to civilian life, many choose to pursue higher education or training as a first step on a new career path. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) administers several benefit programs that can help veterans, including those with disabilities, pay for their education and training. The largest VA education benefit program is the Post-9/11 GI Bill (GI Bill), which according to VA provided approximately \$10.1 billion in benefits to around 658,000 veterans in fiscal year 2020.²

In addition to its education benefit programs, VA administers the Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) program, which primarily helps veterans with disabilities reenter the workforce.³ As with the GI Bill, VR&E can help pay tuition costs for education and training. Unlike the GI Bill, VR&E is only available to veterans who have a service-connected

¹U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Employment Situation of Veterans—2020*, USDL-21-0438 (Washington, D.C.: March 2021).

²Veterans Benefits Administration, *Annual Benefits Report Fiscal Year 2020* (Washington, D.C.: June 2021). Veterans are generally eligible for the Post-9/11 GI Bill if they have 1) served at least 90 days on active duty on or after September 11, 2001 and meet other criteria, or 2) received a Purple Heart for service on or after September 11, 2001, and meet other criteria, or 3) served for at least 30 continuous days on or after September 11, 2001, and were discharged or released for a service-connected disability. 38 U.S.C. § 3311.

³The VR&E program was formerly called the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program. VA changed the program name effective June 22, 2020.

disability. According to VA, in fiscal year 2020 VR&E provided approximately \$1.5 billion in benefits, serving around 123,000 veterans.⁴

While both the GI Bill and VR&E can help veterans with disabilities pay for education and training, each program offers distinct features that may better serve different veterans depending on their individual goals, preferences, and circumstances. Testimony from several veteran service organizations (VSOs) before Congress has raised questions about whether veterans with disabilities who potentially qualify for both programs have adequate information to make an informed choice about which program to use for their education benefits.⁵

You asked us to report on the extent to which veterans with disabilities understand the advantages and disadvantages of each program and how VA informs veterans about education benefits for which they may be eligible. This report (1) describes the reported factors that influence whether veterans with disabilities select the Post-9/11 GI Bill or VR&E, and (2) examines how VA informs veterans with disabilities about the Post-9/11 GI Bill and VR&E education benefits available to them, and the effectiveness of those efforts.

To address both objectives, we reviewed relevant federal laws and interviewed VA officials. To describe factors influencing veteran decisions, and challenges facing veterans when choosing between benefit programs, we conducted semi-structured interviews with campus veteran center officials from six selected schools. We also interviewed officials from six selected VSOs. To ensure diversity in school characteristics and a depth of knowledge about veteran affairs among the schools, we selected them based on several criteria, including school type (public, private, for-profit, community college), a range in the number of GI Bill Students, geographic variation, the existence of a campus veteran center, and the presence of a VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC)

⁴Veterans Benefits Administration, *Annual Benefits Report Fiscal Year 2020* (Washington, D.C.: June 2021).

⁵U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Veterans Affairs, Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, June 4, 2019; testimonies of Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, and Wounded Warrior Project.

counselor at the school.⁶ To obtain a similar depth of knowledge among the VSOs, we selected them based on several criteria, including VSOs that focus on veteran education; VSOs that focus on veterans with disabilities; and large, multifaceted organizations. See appendix I for a description of all selection factors. In addition, we analyzed VA program participant data for fiscal year 2019 provided to us by each program's VA administrating office. We also analyzed 2020 survey responses provided to us by Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), a VSO.⁷

To examine how VA informs veterans with disabilities about education benefits, we reviewed agency printed informational materials, online information, and other outreach materials. We evaluated VA's information and outreach practices against the agency's established strategic goals for external communication and against federal standards for internal control.⁸

In addition, to obtain veterans' perspectives on their experiences when weighing their education benefit options, we emailed a questionnaire to 19 veterans with service-connected disabilities, identified by two VSOs, who had used either the GI Bill or VR&E to help pay for their education, and we received seven completed surveys in response.⁹ The veterans' responses to our survey questions are not generalizable. Lastly, we conducted a literature review of studies related to this topic to learn more about veterans' experiences when choosing between VA education

⁶VSOC is a VA program currently administered on 104 school campuses across the country. It provides veterans and servicemembers with benefit assistance and counseling. VSOC counselors are VA employees.

⁷Through electronic data testing and interviews with agency officials, we determined the two VA data sets and the IAVA survey data were reliable for our purposes. Because the VA participant data include all participants receiving education benefits from each program in fiscal year 2019, they are generalizable for each program population. However, because respondents to the IAVA survey were self-selected and represent a small percentage of program participants, the IAVA survey response data are not generalizable for either program.

⁸GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 10, 2014). Specifically, we applied principle 15 which states that management should externally communicate the necessary quality information to achieve the entity's objectives.

⁹We had planned to conduct several small-group interviews with selected veterans as part of our methodology, but restrictions due to the outbreak of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) prevented us from conducting those interviews.

benefits. Appendix I contains a more detailed description of our objectives, scope, and methodology.

We conducted this performance audit from November 2019 to July 2021 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Post-9/11 GI Bill and VR&E

The Post-9/11 GI Bill, which took effect August 1, 2009, is VA's largest education benefit program.¹⁰ It is administered by VA's Veterans Benefit Administration (VBA) Education Service. Veterans who served on active duty on or after September 11, 2001 are potentially eligible for the GI Bill, including those without a service-connected disability. GI Bill benefits can be used for up to 36 months for a range of learning opportunities including undergraduate and graduate degrees, non-college degree programs, apprenticeships, and on-the-job training. In addition to helping pay for school tuition and fees, the GI Bill also can provide payments for student veterans' housing, books, and supplies.

VR&E can similarly help veterans pay for education benefits, but the program has an employment focus and different eligibility rules than the GI Bill. Administered by VBA VR&E Service, VR&E is intended to help veterans with service-connected disabilities prepare for, obtain, and maintain suitable employment.¹¹ To be eligible for VR&E, veterans must generally (1) be in need of certain services because of certain impairments, and (2) have at least a 10 percent or 20 percent service-

¹⁰During fiscal year 2020 VA administered five education programs, in addition to the GI Bill; 1) All-Volunteer Force Educational Assistance Program (Montgomery GI Bill-Active Duty); 2) Educational Assistance for Members of the Selected Reserve (Montgomery GI Bill-Selected Reserve); 3) Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance; 4) Post-Vietnam Era Veterans Educational Assistance Program; 5) Reserve Educational Assistance Program. Of the \$11.5 billion in benefits provided by all six education programs, the GI Bill provided approximately 88 percent.

¹¹Another primary goal of VR&E is to enable veterans with disabilities achieve independence in daily living.

connected disability rating from VA, depending on the impairment. Table 1 outlines other similarities and differences between the GI Bill and VR&E.

Table 1: Comparison of Selected Post-9/11 GI Bill and Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) Program Features

	Post-9/11 GI Bill	VR&E
Eligibility Requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Served at least 90 days on active duty on or after September 11, 2001 and meet other criteria, or Received a Purple Heart for service on or after September 11, 2001, and meet other criteria, or Served at least 30 continuous days on active duty on or after September 11, 2001, and discharged or released for a service-connected disability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In need of certain services because of certain impairments, and Have at least a 10 percent or 20 percent service connected-disability rating, depending on the impairment
Period of eligibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If separation occurred before January 1, 2013: from the date of separation from active duty until 15 years after the date of separation If separation occurred on or after January 1, 2013: no expiration date 	With various exceptions, generally: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If separation occurred before January 1, 2013: from the date of separation from active military service until 12 years after the date of separation If separation occurred on or after January 1, 2013: no expiration date
Percentage of benefits received based on service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100 percent for those who (1) served on active duty for 36 months or more and meet other criteria, (2) served on active duty for 30 continuous days and were discharged or released for a service-connected disability, or (3) received a Purple Heart for certain service and meet other criteria. From 50 to 90 percent for those who served on active duty for 90 days to 36 months and meet other criteria 	100 percent of benefit regardless of period of service
Selected education and supplemental benefits	Tuition, fees, housing, books, supplies, tutorial assistance, relocation and travel assistance for certain individuals	Tuition, fees, living expenses, books, supplies, tutorial assistance; vocational counseling; and mobility and sensory equipment
Duration of benefits	Up to 36 months	Up to 48 months; extensions possible
Maximum benefits for tuition and fees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In-state public school: full net cost Private school: capped at the lesser of the full net cost or \$25,162.14 for school year 2020-2021 	All schools: \$25,000 per year. Amounts exceeding \$25,000 per year can also be awarded with management approval
Can benefits be transferred to family members	Yes; all 36 months or any unused portion, for certain individuals	No

Source: GAO analysis of relevant federal law and VA documents. | GAO-21-450

Note: The program features described in this table are intended to be general descriptions, and are not an exhaustive or comprehensive description of all program features.

The VR&E program has five tracks that provide a variety of services to veterans with disabilities.¹² The Employment Through Long-Term Services track can provide education benefits to help a veteran with disabilities pay for higher education and training. According to VA, at the end of fiscal year 2019, 96 percent of active VR&E participants were enrolled in this track and 78 percent of VR&E participants in that year received education assistance. Education benefits under VR&E typically include full payment of tuition, fees, books, and supplies, for up to 48 months, with extensions possible in certain circumstances. In addition, veterans who receive VR&E services may also receive a subsistence allowance while pursuing an education. If the veteran also qualifies for the GI Bill, they may be eligible to receive an allowance equal to that provided by the GI Bill.

Veterans with disabilities may use both the GI Bill and VR&E to help pay for education, but they can only receive benefits from one program at a time. Also, the order in which veterans use the programs will impact the total number of months of benefits available to them. Under a new VA interpretation of the relevant law, if a veteran uses VR&E first, they can potentially receive 48 months of benefits under VR&E and also receive an additional 36 months of benefits under the GI Bill. However, if the veteran uses the GI Bill first, then the total number of months is capped at 48 months across both programs.

A key difference between the GI Bill and VR&E is that the GI Bill focuses on helping many categories of veterans obtain education, while VR&E primarily seeks to enable veterans with service-connected disabilities obtain employment and achieve maximum independence in daily living. Unlike the GI Bill, VR&E participants work with an assigned vocational rehabilitation counselor, who helps the veteran identify a suitable employment goal and draft an employment plan that identifies the needed services to achieve that goal. To develop the plan, the counselor and veteran review labor market information for jobs, taking into consideration the veteran's identified abilities, aptitudes, and interests. After assessing obstacles to employment, including possible limitations caused by the veteran's service-connected disabilities, they agree on a written employment plan, which may include pursuing an associates, bachelor, or graduate degree. The counselor has the authority to approve or deny the employment plan. In some instances the final approved plan may be in a

¹²The five tracks are 1) Reemployment with Previous Employer; 2) Rapid Access to Employment; 3) Self-Employment; 4) Employment Through Long-Term Services; and 5) Independent Living Services.

different field of employment than the veteran had originally proposed if the counselor had determined that it was not suitable given the veteran's disability or other factors such as labor market conditions.

Selected Officials Reported That a Lack of Awareness of VR&E Can Prevent Veterans with Disabilities from Making an Informed Choice about Education Benefits

Selected Officials Reported That When Veterans Are Informed about Both Programs, Preferences for Specific Program Features Influence Their Choice

Most school and VSO officials we interviewed said, when given the choice between the GI Bill and VR&E, veterans with disabilities will base their choice on which program features best suit their needs given their unique goals, preferences, and circumstances.¹³ For example, some officials we interviewed said certain veterans, especially those who are younger, do not want to commit to employment in a particular field. These veterans may prefer what they perceive as the GI Bill's freedom to explore different courses of study, as opposed to developing an employment plan as required under VR&E. Our analysis of VR&E participant data showed the median age of participants at the time they applied for the program was 32, slightly older than the median age of 29 for GI Bill participants based on data for that program.¹⁴ However, we found no additional evidence, either from our interviews or our analysis of program participant data and IAVA survey responses, that the makeup of the participant populations for both programs differ remarkably in terms of

¹³As part of our review, we conducted semi-structured interviews with officials from six schools and six VSOs. See appendix I for information regarding our selection methodology.

¹⁴Because the VA participant data include all participants receiving education benefits from each program in fiscal year 2019, it is generalizable for each program population. VA collects the two sets of data using different electronic systems; therefore some differences in reliability may exist. However, we found both sets of data to be reliable for our purposes.

characteristics such as gender, race, or whether the veteran had been enlisted or an officer.

Many officials also said some veterans may welcome the guidance that a counselor can provide, which may steer them towards VR&E. They also said that others prefer the GI Bill because it allows them to select the school and education program of their choice without counselor approval, which they may perceive as potentially limiting their education choices or career plans.

“VR&E was a success due to the fact there is no way around [working] with your... VR&E counselor.”

“I was upset that my VR&E [plan] was denied based on a [counselor’s] personal opinion.”

Source: GAO survey responses | GAO-21-450

Selected School and VSO Officials Reported That Many Veterans with Disabilities Are Unaware or Uninformed about VR&E’s Education Benefits

Most school and VSO officials we interviewed said veterans with disabilities often choose the GI Bill for education benefits because they are unaware that the VR&E program exists. The officials attributed this lack of awareness to VA’s relatively limited promotion of VR&E and because of the prominence of the GI Bill as an education benefit program. Because the military uses GI Bill benefits as a recruitment tool, it is likely familiar to many servicemembers before they join the military, whereas VR&E may become relevant to veterans only after they are diagnosed with a service-connected disability.¹⁵

Many officials also said, in addition to the general lack of awareness about VR&E, they encounter veterans with disabilities who are aware of the program, but who do not know that it can help pay for their education, such as a 4-year college degree. For example, some officials said some veterans believe VR&E only provides job placement assistance. Two officials mentioned instances where they encountered veterans who were unaware of other program features that the GI Bill does not offer, including special equipment to help them mitigate or overcome the effects of their disability, such as mobility aids and voice recognition software.

¹⁵A veteran might not be diagnosed with a service-connected disability for months or years after separating from military service. The basic period of eligibility in which a veteran may use VR&E services is 12 years from the date of separation from active military service. However, any period of time where the veteran had been prevented from participating in the program due to a lack of establishing a service-connected disability is not counted against the 12-year period.

Another official pointed out that some veterans who had a shorter active duty service may not know that while they are only potentially eligible for partial benefits under the GI Bill, they may be eligible for full benefits under VR&E.

Many officials also reported that veterans with disabilities may not be fully aware of the potential benefits of working with an assigned VR&E counselor. For example, without the guidance of a counselor, a veteran using the GI Bill might enroll in a school program that will not lead to suitable employment given their disability. One VSO official pointed out that some veterans with service-connected cognitive disorders may especially be prone to the challenges associated with college and could benefit from the guidance that a counselor can provide.

VA De-emphasizes VR&E Education Benefits in the Information It Provides Veterans with Disabilities

VA provides information about GI Bill and VR&E benefits through various methods, such as in-person communication, online materials, and written communications. Our review of the following methods VA uses to communicate about GI Bill and VR&E program benefits found that communications about the GI Bill generally highlighted education benefits, whereas communications about VR&E did not.

In-person communication

- **Transition Assistance Program (TAP).**¹⁶ TAP provides information on various topics to soon-to-be-separating active-duty servicemembers, and may be the first exposure veterans have to information on VR&E. As part of TAP, VA leads a one-day course entitled, “VA Benefits and Services.” The course participant manual presents the GI Bill as part of the “Education and Training Resources” module and describes how it can pay for higher education. In comparison, the manual presents VR&E within the “Career and Employment Resources” module with no mention of higher education except in an accompanying classroom exercise.

¹⁶The U.S. Department of Defense administers TAP in cooperation with the Departments of Veterans Affairs, Labor, Education, Homeland Security, Small Business Administration, and Office of Personnel Management.

Most officials we spoke to expressed concern that TAP provides too much information in a short period of time.¹⁷ In addition, references to VR&E may or may not be relevant for all TAP participants as they prepare to separate from active duty. For example, a veteran may not receive a diagnosis of a service-connected disability until years after separating. However, VA's participant manual is accessible online for future reference and veterans can retake the VA TAP course virtually online at any time.¹⁸

- **VA personnel.** VA makes agency staff members available to answer veterans' questions about their education benefits. Veterans can call or visit their regional VA office or submit questions online. VA also maintains a toll-free GI Bill Hotline devoted to that program. Those looking for information about VR&E are instructed to call the main VBA Benefits toll-free number.

Veterans participating in VR&E's separate Education and Career Counseling Program also have access to VA personnel,¹⁹ as do those who contact one of the 104 schools participating in VR&E's VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) program. Further, according to VA officials, as part of VA's Solid Start program, launched in December 2019, VA representatives attempt to call veterans three times during their first year after separating from active duty. The phone calls can focus on any topic of interest or concern introduced by the veteran, including education benefits.

Online information

VA officials we interviewed said they consider the internet to be the primary source of information about the GI Bill and VR&E programs. In

¹⁷GAO has reported on TAP in past reports and has made recommendations for improving effectiveness. See GAO, *Transitioning Veterans: DOD Needs to Improve Performance Reporting and Monitoring for the Transition Assistance Program*, [GAO-18-23](#) (Washington, D.C., Nov. 8, 2017), and *Transitioning Veterans: Improved Oversight Needed to Enhance Implementation of Transition Assistance Program*, [GAO-14-144](#) (Washington, D.C., Mar. 5, 2014).

¹⁸<https://www.benefits.va.gov/transition/tap.asp> as of May 19, 2021.

¹⁹The Education and Counseling Program provides career and vocational counseling to transitioning servicemembers within 6 months of leaving the military, to Veterans who have left the military within the past 12 months, or at any time to individuals eligible to use a VA education benefit. The services are available to individuals regardless of disability status, and are designed to provide servicemembers and veterans with personalized counseling and support to help guide career paths and achieve educational and career goals. In fiscal year 2019, approximately 6,400 servicemembers and veterans applied for this program.

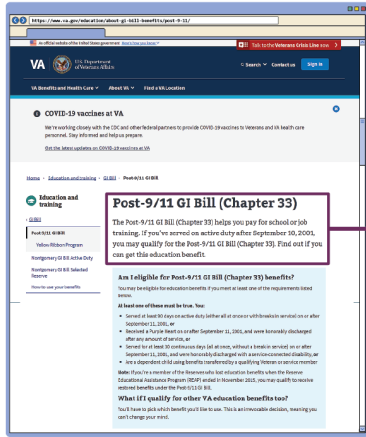
response to our request for online informational materials, VA provided us with several links to websites that describe each program. During our review of the online information, we found many instances where VA referenced or described VR&E as an employment program, but did not mention that it can help veterans with disabilities pay for their education. The following examples illustrate our findings.

- **VA.gov website.**²⁰ Where the website provides information on VR&E, it typically does not explicitly mention that the program can help veterans with disabilities pay for postsecondary education. For example, while the website fact sheet for the GI Bill specifically mentions how the program can help veterans pay for school or job training, the fact sheet for VR&E emphasizes how the program can help veterans explore employment options. It mentions that the program can help address training needs, but makes no mention of schooling or education (see fig. 1). As a result, a veteran unfamiliar with VR&E may not realize that VR&E can, and often does, help veterans pay for college degrees.

²⁰<https://www.va.gov/> as of May 19, 2021.

Figure 1: VA.gov Descriptions of the Post-9/11 GI Bill and Veteran Readiness and Employment Program

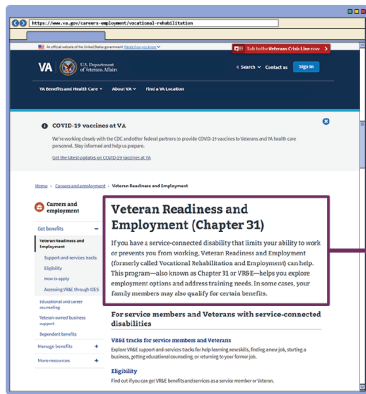
<https://www.va.gov/education/about-gi-bill-benefits/post-9-11/>



Post-9/11 GI Bill (Chapter 33)

The Post-9/11 GI Bill (Chapter 33) helps you pay for school or job training. If you've served on active duty after September 10, 2001, you may qualify for the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Chapter 33). Find out if you can get this education benefit.

<https://www.va.gov/careers-employment/vocational-rehabilitation>



Veteran Readiness and Employment (Chapter 31)

If you have a service-connected disability that limits your ability to work or prevents you from working, Veteran Readiness and Employment (formerly called Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment) can help. This program—also known as Chapter 31 or VR&E—helps you explore employment options and address training needs. In some cases, your family members may also qualify for certain benefits.

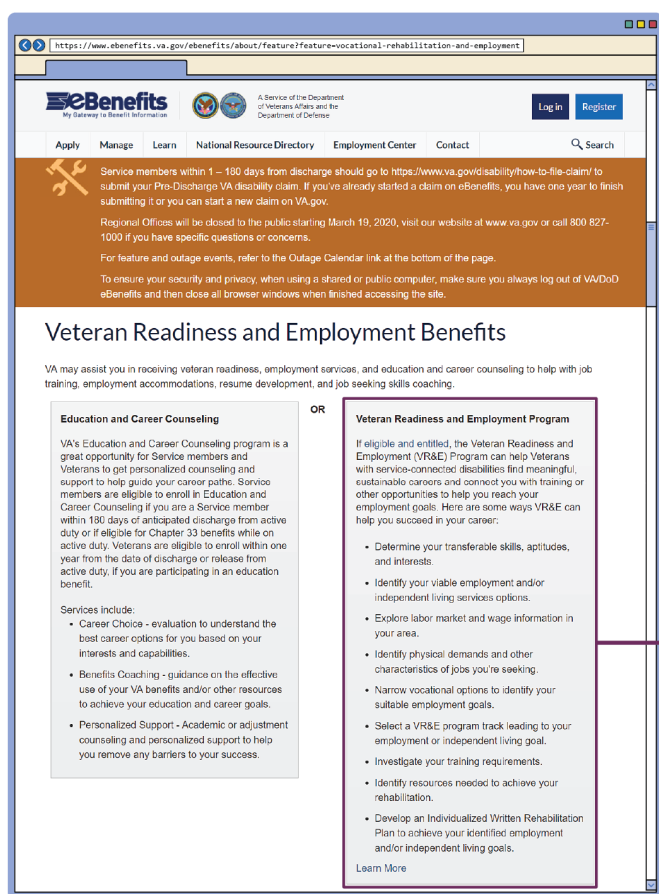
Source: VA Post-9/11 GI Bill website and VA VR&E website both as of May 19, 2021. | GAO-21-450

- **eBenefits website.**²¹ VA and DoD jointly manage the eBenefits website, which provides veterans with links to benefit information and allows them to apply for benefits online. As with VA.gov, the eBenefits website describes VR&E as a program that assists veterans with disabilities return to the workforce, without specific mention that VR&E provides higher education assistance. For example, as shown in

²¹<https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/> as of May 19, 2021.

figure 2, a bulleted list of VR&E services does not include how it can pay for education. Only if the veteran clicks on a “Learn More” link and watches a video will they become aware that VR&E can provide education benefits. Based on the initial description of services, a veteran with disabilities specifically seeking help paying for a college education may not be inclined to take this extra step.

Figure 2: eBenefits.gov Description of the Veteran Readiness and Employment program



Veteran Readiness and Employment Program

If eligible and entitled, the Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) Program can help Veterans with service-connected disabilities find meaningful, sustainable careers and connect you with training or other opportunities to help you reach your employment goals. Here are some ways VR&E can help you succeed in your career:

- Determine your transferable skills, aptitudes, and interests.
- Identify your viable employment and/or independent living services options.
- Explore labor market and wage information in your area.
- Identify physical demands and other characteristics of jobs you're seeking.
- Narrow vocational options to identify your suitable employment goals.
- Select a VR&E program track leading to your employment or independent living goal.
- Investigate your training requirements.
- Identify resources needed to achieve your rehabilitation.
- Develop an Individualized Written Rehabilitation Plan to achieve your identified employment and/or independent living goals.

[Learn More](#)

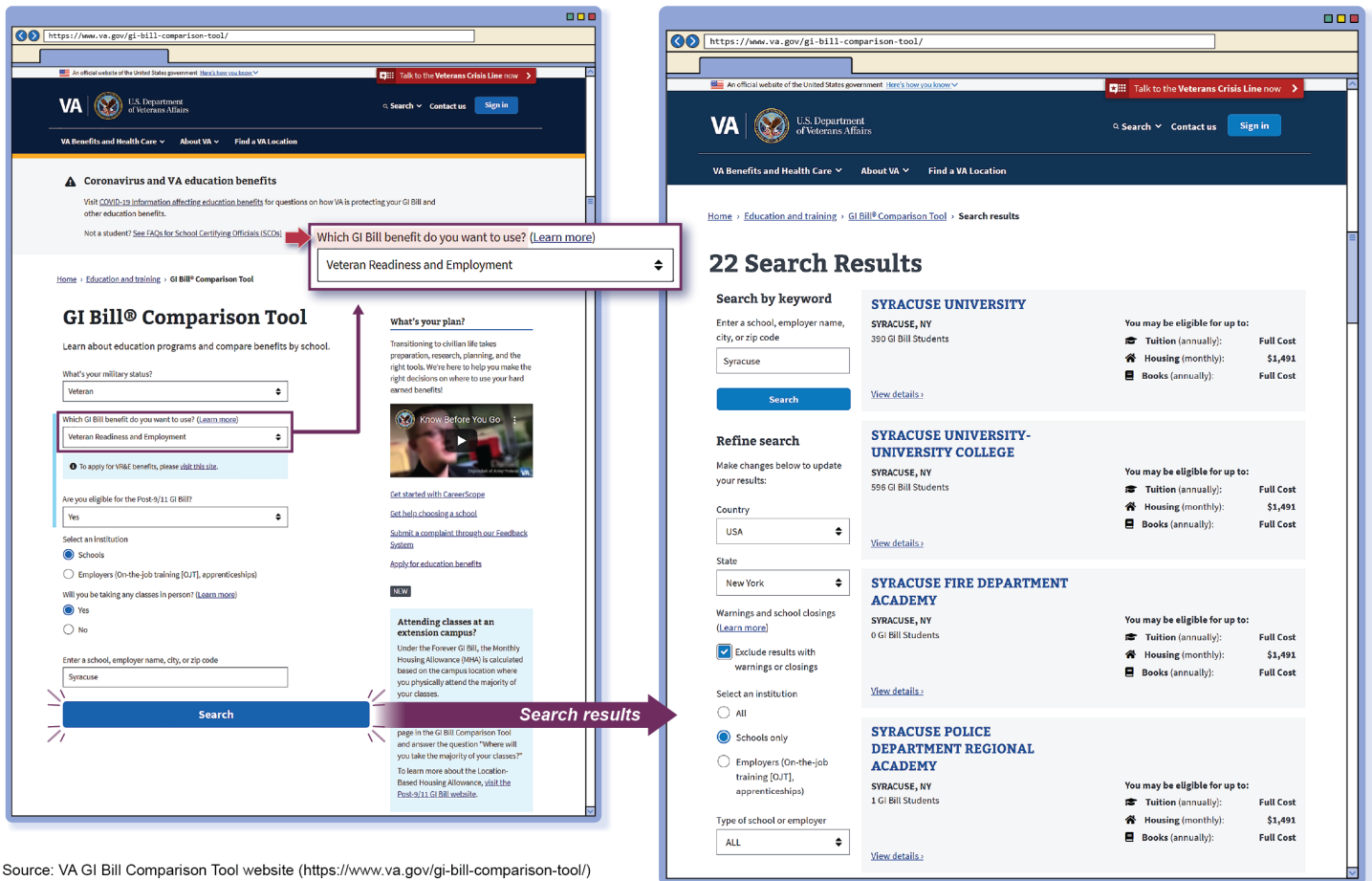
Source: VA/DOD eBenefits website (<https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits/about/feature?feature=vocational-rehabilitation-and-employment>) as of May 19, 2021. | GAO-21-450

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- **GI Bill Comparison Tool.**²² VA.gov offers the GI Bill Comparison Tool, an interactive webpage that enables veterans to estimate the amount of education benefits they would receive under the GI Bill, VR&E, and other VA benefit programs. To use the tool, the veteran selects a VA benefit program and enters additional information, such as their military status and their desired geographic location. After the veteran submits the information, the tool presents them with a list of schools within the geographic area they specified where they can use their benefits, along with the dollar amount they would receive from the selected VA program for tuition, housing, and books (see fig. 3).²³ The veteran can then return to the input page and enter the same information for a different benefit program to generate a similar list of schools and benefits for that program.

²²<https://www.va.gov/gi-bill-comparison-tool/> as of May 19, 2021.

²³When entering their information, the veteran can also choose to receive a list of employers in the geographical area who offer on-the-job training and apprenticeships covered by the program they select.

Figure 3: VA.gov GI Bill Comparison Tool



Source: VA GI Bill Comparison Tool website (<https://www.va.gov/gi-bill-comparison-tool/>) as of May 19, 2021. | GAO-21-450

Note: This example presents the results of a user search for schools in the Syracuse, New York area that accept Veteran Readiness and Employment program benefits and where the student would be attending classes in person. A similar search for the GI Bill generates a list of the same 22 institutions, though for some it states that tuition is capped at \$25,162 and that book subsidies are capped at \$1,000.

While the GI Bill Comparison Tool can enable a veteran to learn about monetary benefits and the schools where they can use them, it does not show other key program differences, nor does it allow for a side-by-side comparison of program features for the GI Bill and other programs. For example, it does not mention maximum benefit periods (e.g. 36 months for the GI Bill and 48 months for VR&E), nor VR&E’s allowance for disability accommodation equipment. During our interviews, some school and VSO officials said the Comparison Tool, while useful, should provide a better one-to-one comparison of the GI Bill and VR&E programs. As

shown in figure 4, VA has provided such a one-to-one comparison for the GI Bill and its Veteran Employment through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) program.²⁴

“[It would help to have] more information about eligibility for each program and the distinctions between the two.”

- veteran with disabilities

Source: GAO survey responses | GAO-21-450

²⁴VET TEC is a 5-year pilot program that can help veterans pay for training programs associated with the high-technology industry. Training topic areas include computer programming, information science, and media applications. The program can also pay for housing while the veteran is enrolled in a training program.

Figure 4: VA.gov Online Side-by-side Comparison of the GI Bill and Veteran Employment through Technology Education Courses Programs

VET TEC VS. GI BILL INFO-SHEET

Know the Difference:

Helping your students navigate whether to use VET TEC (Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses) or Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits when completing your educational program.

Thank you for your support and participation in providing our nation's Veterans and their beneficiaries with the education and training to help propel them in their transition into the civilian workforce. As a VET TEC provider, the below table provides additional information as you help your students decide whether to use VET TEC or the Post-9/11 GI Bill to complete their program.

	VET TEC	Post-9/11 GI Bill Benefits
Is your student looking for a vocational or educational pathway?	Vocational; student expected to find employment upon completion of the program.	Educational
Does this program impact a student's remaining entitlement?	No, this does NOT utilize GI Bill entitlement.	Yes, this reduces the amount of remaining GI Bill Entitlement.
If a student is a non-Post 9/11 GI Bill student, are they eligible?	Yes! GI Bill students with at least one day of unexpired GI Bill entitlement may be eligible.	No
What will VA pay for?	VA pays the cost of the program based on a pay for performance model; 25% upon enrollment and attendance, 25% upon completion, 50% upon employment.	VA pays at a benefit level dependent on length of service. To determine your student's benefit level, please see here .
What benefits can a student receive under this program?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tuition and Fees Housing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tuition and Fees Housing Books and Supplies
Are recipients of Transfer of Entitlement (TOE) beneficiaries and Fry Scholars eligible?	Unfortunately, not at this time.	Yes
Where can I, or my student, learn more?	VET TEC Student Site	Post-9/11 GI Bill Student Site
Where can I find the application?	VET TEC Application	Post-9/11 GI Bill Application
What type of attendance is required?	Full-time	Full-time or part-time

Learn more by reviewing [Frequently Asked Questions](#) and the [VET TEC SCO Handbook](#).

If you have questions about the VET TEC program or how to help students apply, please call 888-442-4551 or email VETTEC.VBABUF@va.gov.

If you have questions about the Post-9/11 Forever GI Bill program or how to help students apply, please contact your ELR or call 888-GIBILL-1 (888-442-4551). To find your ELR, please visit the [Education Liaison Representative page](#).

Source: VA, Veterans Benefits Newsletter, October 2020. | GAO-21-450

Personal written communication

In response to our request for written communication that informs veterans of their educational benefits, VA provided us with two types of letters.

- **Disability Decision Letter.** When VA reaches a decision on a veteran's disability determination, VA mails the veteran a letter that contains, among other things, their monthly disability compensation amount and a table that describes additional benefits available to the veteran due to their disability status. The table breaks out benefit types, including a printed web address for VA's VR&E website. However, beyond the web address, there is no mention of VR&E by name within the letter, nor any details on the benefits available under VR&E.

VA officials we interviewed said they were aware that many veterans likely do not read the entire decision letter. They said many veterans are understandably more interested in their disability compensation than their potential education benefits. The officials also said in past years the letter included an application for VR&E, but that it was removed in recent years as part of a paperwork reduction effort. Likewise, many school and VSO officials we interviewed said that VA's disability decision letters are generally ineffective in informing veterans about their education benefits in part because the letters present information about such benefits on later pages.²⁵ The letters that we reviewed presented disability compensation amounts relatively early (pages 1-4), while information on other benefits was presented deeper within the letter (pages 6-9).

- **VR&E Motivational Letter.** According to VA officials, VA regional offices mail a motivational letter to each veteran after they receive their disability rating. As shown in figure 5, the letter states that VR&E can help the veteran reach their employment and independent living goals and lists available services such as job placement, resume writing, and interviewing skill enhancement. The letter also states that VR&E can help the veteran pay for retraining, including tuition, but it does not specifically mention that such retraining can include pursuing an undergraduate or graduate degree. Notably, the word "education" does not appear in the letter, which may cause readers to perceive VR&E as a program solely focused on vocational training and employment.

²⁵In response to our request for representative copies of the letters, VA provided us with six letters, each of which was between eight and 11 pages in length.

Figure 5: Excerpts from Veteran Readiness and Employment Motivational Letter

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
VA Regional Office
«ROAddress»

«CurrentDate»
«FullName»
«MailingAddress»

In Reply Refer to:
«RCStationNumber»/28
«ChainPayee»

Dear «FullName»:

Do you need help preparing for, finding, or keeping a job? Do you need help living more independently?

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) program can help Veterans with service-connected disabilities reach their employment or independent living goal.

How can we help you?

If your goal is to become employed, the VR&E program provides testing and counseling to help you find a career that matches your interests, abilities, and skills. A counselor will work closely with you to make a plan that will help you reach your career goal.

If you qualify for the full benefit of VR&E services, your counselor will work with you to implement your training plan (if needed) and employment plan by using some or all of the following services:

- Retraining, which includes a monthly subsistence allowance and the cost of tuition, books, fees, and supplies
- Job placement help
- Resume writing
- Interviewing skills
- Help starting a small business (if approved)
- Counseling, medical, and dental services

If your goal is to live more independently, your counselor will assess your independent living needs, work closely with your doctor to find services to address those needs, and coordinate with a variety of VA and community resources to meet those needs.

Source: GAO analysis of VA documents. | GAO-21-450

VA officials we interviewed said they keep the descriptions of VR&E somewhat broad to manage the expectations of veterans, some of whom may not be prepared for post-secondary education. They said they instead focus on individual plan-setting toward suitable employment, which may involve higher education. However, consistent with our review, most school and VSO officials we interviewed said VA's informational materials and outreach efforts do not adequately inform veterans with disabilities about their education benefit options, as evidenced by the number of veterans they encounter who do not know about VR&E or the benefits it can provide.²⁶ VA's portrayal of VR&E as an employment program reflects the program's name and goals, but strict adherence to

²⁶A 2015 University of Washington study also found that veterans with disabilities did not feel they had been provided enough guidance and information about all VA education benefit programs and expressed that, if provided the information, they might have chosen the VR&E program. Forty percent of all survey respondents in the study indicated they had a disability rating that would make them eligible to apply for VR&E, yet a small percentage (6.9 percent) chose this option. See Geri L. Bell, *After the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan: Veterans' Adjustment and the Use of Benefits in Post-Secondary Education* (Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington, 2015).

this classification may serve to understate the broad services the program provides, including education benefits.

In its 2018-2024 Strategic Plan, VA established a primary strategic goal of providing clear information that helps veterans make informed decisions that are best for them.²⁷ Further, federal internal control standards state that agencies should externally communicate the necessary quality information to help achieve the agency's goals.²⁸ By providing additional information about VR&E's education benefits and allowing direct comparisons between VR&E and the GI Bill, VA could better position veterans with disabilities to make more fully informed decisions about choosing the program that best meets their needs.

Conclusions

The Post-9/11 GI Bill and VR&E programs have helped hundreds of thousands of veterans with service-connected disabilities transition from military to civilian life. Both programs can cover part or all of the costs associated with higher education degrees including tuition, living expenses, and books. However, each program offers distinct benefits, features, and requirements that may appeal differently to different veterans. The GI Bill's education benefits are widely known by veterans—often since the time they entered active military duty. In contrast, the VR&E program, and the education benefits and other services it provides, are generally less well known and understood.

VA has an agency-wide strategic goal of providing veterans with clear information to make informed decisions. Further, federal internal control standards state that agencies should externally communicate the necessary quality information to help achieve the agency's goals. VA uses a variety of communication vehicles that can inform veterans with disabilities about the benefits and services afforded by the GI Bill and VR&E. However, VA could take steps to better ensure veterans have the information they need to make well-informed decisions. Augmenting its current approach to promoting VR&E by including more information about how the program can help veterans pay for higher education, and by facilitating direct comparison between the features of the GI Bill and VR&E, would help VA better meet this goal. Moreover, these steps would

²⁷VA, *Department of Veterans Affairs: 2018-2024 Strategic Plan* (Washington, D.C., updated May 31, 2019). See Goal 1: "Veterans Choose VA for Easy Access, Greater Choices, and Clear Information to Make Informed Decisions."

²⁸[GAO-14-704G](#).

help better position veterans with disabilities to take the greatest advantage of the benefits these programs can offer.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making the following two recommendations to VA:

The Secretary of VA should take steps to provide veterans with additional information that VR&E can help those with service-connected disabilities pay for education. For example, VA could review and evaluate its websites and written communications to identify ways to better promote the breadth of services that the VR&E program provides, including education benefits. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of VA should take steps to provide veterans with disabilities information about the comparative features of the GI Bill and VR&E programs. For example, VA could include a side-by-side comparison chart, or interactive tool, on its GI Bill Comparison Tool to inform veterans about the differences and similarities between the GI Bill and VR&E. (Recommendation 2)

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to VA for comment. In its written comments, reproduced in appendix II, VA concurred with our recommendations and said it will, among other things, review and revise VA webpages and written communications regarding VR&E educational benefits, and develop a side-by-side comparison chart to inform veterans on the differences and similarities between the GI Bill and VR&E programs.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and other interested parties. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-7215 or curdae@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last

page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix III.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Elizabeth H. Curda". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent "E" and "C".

Elizabeth H. Curda
Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

This report (1) describes the reported factors that influence whether veterans with disabilities select the Post-9/11 GI Bill or VR&E, and (2) examines how VA informs veterans with disabilities about the Post-9/11 GI Bill and VR&E education benefits available to them, and the effectiveness of those efforts.

To describe reported factors that may influence whether veterans with disabilities select the GI Bill or VR&E, we conducted semi-structured phone interviews with a nongeneralizable sample of officials from six selected schools,¹ and officials from six selected veteran service organizations (VSO).² All school officials were employed at campus veteran centers, which provide support to student veterans.³ We selected schools using VA GI Bill Comparison Tool data as of March 2020. The data include descriptive information on schools that are approved for VA benefits. We selected schools based on the following criteria: 1) the type of school (public, private, for-profit, community college), 2) a range in the number of GI Bill Students,⁴ 3) variation in VBA region, 4) the existence of a campus veteran center, and 5) the presence of a VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) counselor at the school (a mix of schools with and without).⁵

We selected VSOs from VA's Directory of VSOs.⁶ VSOs assist veterans with benefit claims, sponsor a range of veteran-centric programs, and lobby Congress on behalf of veterans. We selected VSOs that 1) focus on

¹The selected schools were: Colorado State University – Ft. Collins; George Washington University; Hawaii Pacific University; Pennsylvania State University; Thomas Nelson Community College; and Trident University.

²The selected VSOs were: American Legion; Disabled American Veterans; Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America; Student Veterans of America; Veterans Education Success; and Wounded Warrior Project.

³School veteran centers are separate from VA's Vet Centers that the agency administers throughout the country.

⁴We used the number of GI Bill students as a proxy for the total number of student veterans enrolled at the school and assumed large populations would include a sizable number of students using VR&E.

⁵VSOC is a VA program currently administered on 104 school campuses across the country. It provides Veterans and servicemembers with benefit assistance and counseling. VSOC counselors are VA employees.

⁶<https://www.va.gov/vso/> as of June 9, 2021.

veteran education, 2) focus on veterans with disabilities, or 3) are large, multifaceted organizations.

We used a standard set of questions to interview school and VSO officials to ensure we consistently captured their views on various aspects of our objectives. We analyzed the results of all interviews and related documents to identify the main themes and develop summary findings. To characterize the officials' views throughout this report, we defined modifiers (e.g., "most") to quantify their views as follows:

- "most officials" represents officials from 10 to 12 schools and VSOs,
- "many officials" represents officials from seven to nine schools and VSOs, and,
- "some officials" represents officials from three to six schools and VSOs.

To determine the extent to which veteran characteristics were a factor in whether veterans with disabilities chose the GI Bill or VR&E program, we analyzed VA program participant data for fiscal year 2019 provided by each program's VA administrating office. We also analyzed 2020 survey responses provided to us by Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), a VSO. The IAVA survey response data contained participant characteristics, such as race, that VA does not collect for either program. Through electronic data testing and interviews with agency officials, we determined the two VA data sets and the IAVA survey data were reliable for our purposes.⁷ The VA participant data include all participants receiving education benefits from each program in fiscal year 2019. Because respondents to the IAVA survey were self-selected and represent a small percentage of program participants, the IAVA survey response data are not generalizable for either program.

To examine how VA informs veterans with disabilities about the education benefits offered by the Post-9/11 GI Bill and VR&E programs, we reviewed agency printed informational materials, online information, and other outreach materials. To gauge the effectiveness of VA's information and outreach efforts, we interviewed school and VSO officials. We also evaluated VA's practices against the agency's established goals related to external communication as stated in its 2018-2024 strategic plan. In

⁷VA collects the two sets of data using different electronic systems, therefore some differences in reliability may exist.

this plan, VA established a primary strategic objective of providing clear information that helps veterans make informed decisions that are best for them.⁸ As such, we determined that the information and communication component of internal control was significant to this objective, along with the related principle that management should externally communicate the necessary quality information to achieve the entity's objectives.⁹ Specifically, we assessed whether VA externally communicated the necessary quality information to achieve their strategic objective.

To obtain veterans' perspectives on 1) why they chose the benefit program they used, 2) the challenges they may have had choosing between the GI Bill and VR&E, and 3) the effectiveness of VA's outreach and informational materials about each program, we emailed a questionnaire to 19 veterans, and received seven completed surveys in response. The veterans were identified by two VSOs as having service-connected disabilities and who had used either the GI Bill or VR&E, or both, to help pay for their education. The veterans' responses to our survey questions are not generalizable but provide illustrative examples of their experiences with these programs.

We also conducted a literature review of studies related to the topics of veterans' selection of education benefits, their understanding of the benefits available to them, their experiences using the GI Bill and VR&E, and the unique challenges faced by veterans with disabilities.

We conducted this performance audit from November 2019 to July 2021 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

⁸VA, *Department of Veterans Affairs: 2018-2024 Strategic Plan* (Washington, D.C., updated May 31, 2019). See Goal 1: "Veterans Choose VA for Easy Access, Greater Choices, and Clear Information to Make Informed Decisions

⁹GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 10, 2014).

Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Veterans Affairs



DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON

July 9, 2021

Ms. Elizabeth Curda
Director
Education, Workforce
and Income Security Issues
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Curda:

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has reviewed the Government Accountability Office (GAO) draft report: ***Transitioning Veterans: VA Could Better Inform Veterans with Disabilities About their Education Benefit Options*** (GAO-21-450).

The enclosure contains the actions to be taken to address the draft report recommendations. VA appreciates the opportunity to comment on your draft report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tanya J. Bradsher".

Tanya J. Bradsher
Chief of Staff

Enclosure

**Appendix II: Comments from the Department
of Veterans Affairs**

Enclosure

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Comments to
Government Accountability Office (GAO) Draft Report
***Transitioning Veterans: VA Could Better Inform Veterans with Disabilities
About their Education Benefit Options***
(GAO-21-450)

Recommendation 1: The Secretary of VA should take steps to provide veterans with additional information that VR&E can help those with service-connected disabilities pay for education. For example, VA could review and evaluate its websites and written communications to identify ways to better promote the breadth of services that the VRE&E program provides, including education benefits.

VA Response: Concur. The Veterans Benefit Administration (VBA) Veteran Readiness & Employment (VR&E) Service currently uses a combination of digital and traditional in-person outreach to market the program and its services to Service members, Veterans and their dependents. VR&E will ensure that potential program participants understand that VR&E can assist with an educational component as part of the individualized written rehabilitation plan, if it is required to enable them to reach their vocational goal.

Actions that VBA's VR&E will take include the following:

- Develop language to inform Veterans that VR&E has an educational component, as part of the individualized written rehabilitation plan;
- Review VR&E web pages on VA.gov to determine where to place language on the VR&E webpage;
- Work with VBA's Office of Strategic Engagement to revise the webpage;
- Revise printed materials to reflect the new language on VA.gov;
- Notify field offices of revisions and deploy electronic factsheets for marketing and outreach; and
- Work with Education Service to include information about VR&E on its webpage.

Target Completion Date: November 30, 2021.

Recommendation 2: The Secretary of VA should take steps to provide veterans with disabilities information about the comparative features of the GI Bill and VR&E programs. For example, VA could include a side-by-side comparison chart, or interactive tool, on its GI Bill comparison Tool to inform veterans about the differences and similarities between the GI Bill and VR&E.

**Appendix II: Comments from the Department
of Veterans Affairs**

Enclosure

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Comments to
Government Accountability Office (GAO) Draft Report
***Transitioning Veterans: VA Could Better Inform Veterans with Disabilities
About their Education Benefit Options***
(GAO-21-450)

VA Response: Concur in principle: VBA's Education Service and VR&E Service will develop a side-by-side comparison chart and provide it to Veterans once they become eligible for VR&E benefits, to inform Veterans on the differences and similarities between G.I. Bill and VR&E benefits.

Target Completion Date: October 30, 2021.

Page 2 of 2

Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Elizabeth H. Curda, (202) 512-7215 or curdae@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the individual named above, Mark Glickman (Assistant Director), David Perkins (Analyst in Charge), and Peter Choi made significant contribution to the report. In addition, James Bennett, Edward Bodine, Alex Galuten, Sarah Gilliland, Joy Myers, Moon Parks, Monica Savoy, Joy Solmonson, and Almeta Spencer made key contributions.

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