

**U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)
Federal Advisory Committee**

Veterans' Advisory Committee on Education (VACOE)

November 13-15, 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose: The purpose of the Committee is to advise the Secretary of Veterans Affairs on the administration of education and training programs for Veterans, Service members, Reservists and Dependents of Veterans including programs under Chapters 30, 32, 33, 35, and 36 of title 38, and Chapter 1606 of title 10, United States Code. The purpose of this meeting is for the Committee to hear reports from three subcommittees (Modernization, Veteran Vocational Education and Training Programs, and Distance Learning), to hear other updates and briefings, and to discuss potential 2023 recommendations.

Rules of Engagement: Kaprice Dyson conducted rules of engagement.

Transcription Services: Provided by Jamison Professional Services

Staff Present:

- Kaprice Dyson, Lead Designated Federal Officer (DFO)
- Joseph Garcia, Executive Director, Education Service
- Joshua Lashbrook, Assistant Director, Operations Support and Education Service
- Pete Spanos, Chief of Data Analytics, Education Service
- Heather Real, Customer Experience Strategist, VEO
- Barbara Wilson, Customer Experience Strategist, VEO
- James Ruhlman, Deputy Director, Program Management

VACOE Members Present:

- Mona Dexter, Chair; Chief of Staff | Vice President, Operations & Communications, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation – Hiring Our Heroes
- Keith Hauk, Vice Chair; Associate Vice President, Stateside Military Operations, University of Maryland University College (UMGC)
- Barry Butler, Ph.D., President, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University
- Sarah Roberts, Head of Military and Veteran Programs, LinkedIn
- Michael Haynie, Ph.D., Vice Chancellor, Syracuse University, Founder and Executive Director, Syracuse University's Institute for Veterans and

Military Families

- Soudarak (Sue) Luangkhot Hoppin, President and Founder, National Military Spouse Network
- Jared S. Lyon, President and CEO, Student Veterans of America (SVA)
- John T. Quintas, Major General, USAF, (Retired), Managing Director, Military Affairs, Amazon.com
- Darrell L. Roberts, Director of Organizing, International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART)
- David Salgado, Director, Veterans Education, Texas Veterans Commission
- Violet Velazquez, Reservist, U.S. Navy
- Cynthia A. Warrick, Ph.D., RPh, President, Stillman College

[Contents](#)

November 13, 2023	4
Opening Remarks	4
Welcome from EDU Director	4
Discussion with Under Secretary for Benefits	8
Committee Discussion	12
November 14, 2023	16
Roll Call	16
Opening Remarks	16
Committee Discussion	16
Digital GI Bill Update	18
Subcommittee on Distance Learning Discussion	20
Policies & Procedures Update	23
Subcommittee on Distance Learning - Continued	26
Subcommittee on Veteran Vocational Education and Training Programs	26
Committee Discussion	30
Outcome Measures Overview & Updates	31
Committee Discussion	36
Public Comment	36
Closing Discussion/Remarks	36
November 15, 2023	36
Opening Remarks	36
Committee Discussion	37
VEO Update on Military Spouse Journey Map Project	38
Oversight & Accountability Update	48
Public Comments	53
Subcommittee on Modernization	54
Closing Discussion/Remarks	60

November 13, 2023

Opening Remarks

Kaprice Dyson began by introducing herself as the new lead designated federal officer for VACOE. She briefly reviewed the schedule and explained the rules of engagement and explained how the meeting would be conducted. She then turned the floor over to Mona Dexter, Chair. Chair Dexter thanked Ms. Dyson and welcomed her and all other attendees to the meeting. She introduced herself, thanked the Committee members for their work, and shared how she was looking forward to their discussions and speakers. Chair Dexter turned the floor over to Keith Hauk, Vice Chair.

Mr. Hauk introduced himself and acknowledged the hard work of all their VA representatives as well as subcommittee members. He specifically thanked Jarod Lyon and Dr. Barry Butler for the work on their subcommittee recommendations. Mr. Hauk shared how pleased he was to see potential recommendation points around non-credit programs and how better to address those from a VA benefit perspective. He then turned the floor back over to Chair Dexter.

Chair Dexter also thanked the subcommittees for their hard work. She then welcomed Joseph Garcia, Executive Director, Education Service.

Welcome from EDU Director

Mr. Garcia thanked Chair Dexter and confirmed the amount of time he had to speak with Ms. Dyson. Mr. Garcia then shared that he would be starting out by covering the current strategic initiatives in Education Service, as well as their mission.

He began by saying that Education Service involves basically three things. The first is to ensure they have timely and accurate benefits delivery. He shared that 10 billion dollars a year are dispersed to approximately 800,000 beneficiaries, including dependents. Post-9/11 GI Bill has about 80 percent of the claims.

Mr. Garcia said the second aspect of their mission relates to ensuring they have the informed consumer. Not only for the Veteran, for those who support the Veteran such as the schools and School Certifying Officials (SCOs). He emphasized the importance of supporting their SCOs and said they've been very deliberate about doing so.

He pointed out that one aspect of having an informed consumer is having the GI Bill Comparison Tool. He shared how there have been around 50 million page views on the comparison tool, and explained that it allows the user to compare schools against each other with aspects such as if they are public or private, how much the tuition is, et cetera.

He went on to explain the third component of their mission as program integrity, making sure their Veterans are not subject to predatory practices. He then explained what he calls four pillars, which all interrelate. The first pillar is customer experience,

which goes back to the Veteran and supporting the Veteran and those who work to support the Veteran as well, such as SCOs and State Approving Agencies (SAA). He said this pillar is the “what”. The “how” are the next two pillars, continuous improvement mindset in everything they do, and leveraging technology such as the Digital GI Bill. The last piece is the “who”, which is their Education Service staff including the RPOs, Buffalo, Muskogee, and trying to develop a people-first culture.

Mr. Garcia shared that in the latest All-Employee Survey, they moved their overall score from 57 the previous year to 69, which is a huge improvement. He asked if there were any questions about the mission parameters or strategic plan and initiative.

Mr. Hauk said for informed consumers, Mr. Garcia had mentioned institutions and beneficiaries. He asked how Mr. Garcia sees the SAAs, that they’re not a consumer but that they are a stakeholder. Mr. Garcia said that in the strategic initiative, Job 1 is customer experience. Not only for the Veteran, but also for those who support the Veteran, which includes the SAAs. He shared that Education Service has been very deliberate about having a good relationship with State Approving Agencies and are in constant contact with them as well as having monthly meetings. He emphasized how it’s not possible to have a good working relationship with SAAs if they are not staying up to date with every step of the processes they each need to take.

Mr. Garcia shared how he attended a session in San Antonio recently which was National Training Institute and focused on new SAAs and new Education Liaison Representatives. He gave an example of how Education Service collaborates with SAAs, sharing that the previous year, their program approvals on the VA side had an average time of 40 days to complete. Working together, that time is now down to 20 days.

Mr. Hauk thanked Mr. Garcia and agreed that Education Service is doing their part to help SAAs with their role in the process, sharing that his institution had just received notification of their third risk-based survey (RBS). Mr. Garcia said that they do compliance surveys from their compliance specialists for schools that have more than 20 enrollees, every two years. Risk-based surveys is something that SAAs do. He shared how they had a great discussion with SAAs at a hearing where the schools were giving feedback about risk-based surveys and compliance survey and asked how much is too much when it comes to program integrity and review.

Mr. Garcia shared that in 2022, they had around 2200 RBSs. They want to be more deliberate about when a RBS is triggered such as specific factors in population or revenue. He said they’re working with the National Association of State Approving Agencies to better streamline when a RBS is triggered and that they anticipate at least a 40 percent reduction in RBSs.

Jared Lyon with Student Veterans of America had a clarification question, asking if it was 40 business days or calendar days. Mr. Garcia said he believes it’s calendar days. Mr. Garcia shared that with non-credit programs, Education Service wants to be

very deliberate when it comes to employment. He shared that a recent proposal given was for a commercial driver's license program, but by statute they cannot approve a program unless it has been operating for at least two years. The legislative proposal given recently was that there was an exemption for commercial driver's license programs because there is a shortage of truck drivers currently. Education Service had a conversation with SAAs so they could collaborate when they spoke to Congress about the proposal.

Mr. Garcia also spoke about how pre-apprenticeships are not registered or as regulated, so the Department of Labor may not have the measurable outcomes, while they do with registered apprenticeship programs. He said that they had to consider if there would be enough value added by the time someone who was in a pre-apprenticeship program moves on to a full apprenticeship program. Mr. Garcia said that they had decided that as long as the SAAs are the ones that approve the quality of a pre-apprenticeship program, Education Service would be more amenable.

Dr. Butler shared that in the next day's meeting, they would be discussing what he considers sort of the evolving nature of education. Not only online, but as academic programs no longer follow the traditional semester length, making sure that the VA is dynamic and quick enough to respond to changes in higher education. He said they would be having some recommendations they may bring forward, and agreed that a lot is changing. Dr. Butler shared how the aviation industry is strong at the time, and at his institution, there are hundreds of Veterans who are in the professional pilot bachelor's degree program. Due to what is defined as a traditional semester, some of these programs don't fit into that description since they may take more time to do things such as flight time. He shared that it is challenging for these Veterans to work with the traditional models of how VA looks at education.

Mr. Garcia said that reminds him of online schooling, which came up at the last legislative hearing. He shared how Education Service has been proposing a change to the monthly housing allowance given under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, and how the online rate is half of what an in-person student would receive. Therefore, their proposal is that the monthly housing allowance for online students for summer programs is increased. He said that they wanted to propose for all online students, but that it may be a budget problem at the current time. Mr. Garcia did point out that summer classes may mean different things from an online university, however.

He then spoke about VET TEC, Veterans Employment Through Technology Education Courses, and how the pilot runs out in April 2024. They are supporting that the pilot becomes permanent. Mr. Garcia said they are working to stay in touch with what the needs are for the Veterans, as well as environment and timing.

Mr. Lyon shared that Student Veterans of America had also testified the same day to Congress and that it would require Congressional approval to change the housing allowance. He said that if they can get the housing allowance changed for summer students, it's helping them start somewhere so they can then move on in the future to cover all online students. Mr. Garcia said that 37 percent of those who receive MHA receive the online rate.

Darrell Roberts asked if there had been any discussion on registered apprenticeship and declining payments. He said that as an apprentice receives a raise, the payment goes down to 80 percent. Mr. Garcia said that had not been discussed, as the focus was more on pre-apprenticeships. He said that they could take a look at that, however.

Mr. Garcia shared that for outreach, Education Service had been doing a lot of road shows which include not only visiting the schools, SAAs, SCOs, school leadership, but also Veteran Town Halls not only for Veterans at that institution but for all local Veterans.

Mr. Lyon asked if the 37 percent receiving the online rate for housing allowance were all online students. At that time, however, the next speaker had arrived and so Ms. Dyson thanked Mr. Garcia for his time and said they would be reaching out with additional questions, and the floor was turned over to Joshua Jacobs, Under Secretary for Benefits, for his presentation.

Discussion with Under Secretary for Benefits

Mr. Jacobs said he had asked to join their meeting in order to have a conversation with the Committee. He said he wanted to talk about how they as a department, government, and country, could better support student Veterans in their education journey. He shared how they tend to spend more time on the front end of the process for application, acceptance, and payment. He wanted to speak about what was being done to support student Veterans and their beneficiaries along their education journey.

Mr. Jacobs asked the Committee what they felt should be done differently in Education Service, and what they are doing well but could improve upon, and is there anything they should stop doing because it's not providing any benefit to Veterans. He asked what the roles and responsibilities are for each person and each group that is part of the process, as well as if they have the data they need in order to determine if they are successful or not.

He shared his concern about underreporting and not having certain data, such as when the student is no longer actively receiving benefits, which needs to be worked through. He said the nature of academic progress metrics is somewhat limited by the access they have to external data sources. Mr. Jacobs shared that he was looking forward to the results of a multi-year study focusing on GI Bill student outcomes that started in 2016 and involves Census, IRS, VA data, and National Student

Clearinghouse. He said the report should be coming out soon, and so with greater insight, they would be able to ask more interesting and thought-provoking questions.

Mr. Jacobs said he wanted the Committee's help to take the data from that study, and make actionable recommendations for changes. He asked the Committee to help them think through how Education Service can do more, do better, and use the data from the upcoming study to drive it to the correct next steps. He then opened the floor for any questions or comments.

Dr. Butler shared how in higher education, when students enter and don't complete, it can be frustrating and feels like something went wrong. He asked if the data would show why people start a program and don't finish, because it's through that information that the school can try to improve what they're doing.

Mr. Jacobs asked Mr. Garcia if they would have that level of data. Mr. Garcia said not on their side, but that there was other data from other research projects that did studies on things such as student debt which could include why they left the program.

Mr. Lyon said that as a Committee, they have had a continued conversation between all of them and the subcommittees that are part of the Committee about what Mr. Jacobs was asking. He suggested that Dr. Michael Haynie, another Committee member, might have insight on this topic. He shared with Mr. Jacobs that Student Veterans of America have helped partner with the VA on reports dating back to 2013. Mr. Lyon explained to Dr. Butler that one of the challenges is VA's ability to report on the fact that somebody completed a degree. He said that VA knows when the benefit is and isn't being used, but unless the Veteran was using the benefit when the degree was completed, VA would not have access to that information.

Mr. Lyon then said that he felt the Committee members who are university administrators may be able to help even more with the Committee's recommendations. He shared that the data needed does exist in the Federal Government, just not necessarily through VA. He suggested that through their advocacy, they could perhaps make recommendations that would bring in the Department of Education, who would have the data mentioned.

Mr. Lyon suggested a few reasons that a Veteran or beneficiary may not be using their benefit, such as it being expired, choosing to preserve their benefits for later education, or not being eligible for GI Bill at the beginning of it being established.

Dr. Cynthia Warrick said that Mr. Lyon's response was helpful to her, because the information is not only important for the VA but also DoE. She said it would be helpful to know if Veterans are completing certificates or degrees at for-profit schools specifically. She said she would like to review information about where degrees are being completed by student Veterans, and which degrees are being completed the most, as well as what degrees have higher rates of completion.

Chair Dexter agreed that finding the “why” behind attrition would be critical. She also suggested that they work on stakeholder mapping to understand where the VA has the oversight or ability to implement things, as well as who the other stakeholders are who need to be engaged in this process.

Mr. Jacobs concurred with Chair Dexter, sharing that he knew they would not be able to try to take care of everything at once but that it’s important to pinpoint what issues to focus on the most.

Mr. Lyon thanked Mr. Jacobs and Mr. Garcia for their willingness to have open, honest discussions about what is known and not known as well as what they need more help with. Mr. Lyon said maybe they should work with Ms. Dyson as their DFO to perhaps get a presentation from BLS or Census. He also shared how Sarah Roberts, another Committee member, and her team at LinkedIn had done a recent review of all LinkedIn data of every person who identified as a Veteran on the platform. They found that nearly 62 percent of them had completed a degree at least at the bachelor’s level.

Sue Hoppin suggested they maintain metrics for usage and completion rates for dependents and beneficiaries who also use the GI Bill. She said that in her experience, if active-duty military and their beneficiaries aren’t using the GI Bill, it often is because of confusion about the program because the GI Bill changes depending on the branch of military.

Mr. Garcia shared with the road shows, they are also visiting military bases and trying to get more into the active-duty space so more active-duty military members know that they have access to the GI Bill. Ms. Hoppin said they may also be able to have recommendations for grassroots organizations Mr. Garcia and Education Service could work with for that goal.

Dr. Haynie agreed and acknowledged Mr. Lyon’s suggestions about data. He suggested that Education Service ask institutions involved with the GI Bill every year about Veterans who are no longer using their GI Bill benefits, and if they can indicate whether or not those Veterans earned a degree from that institution. He said that it may get them pretty far with those specific questions. Mr. Garcia said they could look into it, and asked what data they had from National Clearinghouse and if it goes towards the gap in information they currently have.

Mr. Lyon agreed that the National Student Clearinghouse has the majority of data for undergraduate and graduate students unless they were attending a 2-year program or other certificate-based programs.

Mr. Hauk shared how his institution, University of Maryland Global Campus, knows what their student’s disposition is, what they’re doing for classes, when they start, and when they stop. They are also able to track from the time the student stops using their VA benefits if they continue their education. Mr. Hauk suggested that what works for

his and other institutions the Committee members are involved in would look different from how a smaller institution would be able to manage the data. He suggested they should engage elsewhere in the stakeholder community as well to get a wider variety of information.

Mr. Jacobs thanked Mr. Hauk for the suggestion and said it was something they would work on. He said they would have a follow-up conversation once the report he mentioned was public and the Committee had time to look it over. He asked if there were any other questions or comments before he reached the end of his allotted speaking time.

Mr. Hauk suggested that in addition to ensuring staff satisfaction, Mr. Jacobs should look into including the certifying officials that work across the institutional footprint on behalf of the institutions. He said that looking at how they can improve that relationship is important and they are working with Veteran Experience Officers to look at how to better leverage surveys, the qualitative and quantitative insights they get from the VEO work with operational data. He said one of the topics is education and he thinks it's a good opportunity to blend some of that together.

Mr. Lyon echoed Mr. Hauk's remarks and thanked Mr. Jacobs and Mr. Garcia for all of their hard work.

Chair Dexter noted that their next allotted time is for discussion, and that if Mr. Jacobs and Mr. Garcia had time to stay on, they would be welcome to do so and join their discussion. She also gave kudos not only on the improved processing time but also employee satisfaction. Mr. Jacobs said he would be happy to do so.

Committee Discussion

Mr. Jacobs asked Chair Lewis if there was a structured conversation she was looking to pursue or if it was more open ended. Chair Lewis said the purpose would be to see if the Committee wanted to follow on and continue the discussion they were having with Mr. Jacobs. She asked what else he had that he wanted to speak with them about.

Mr. Jacobs brought up SCOs, and said the question is, should they mandate the number of SCOs? They know SCOs are critical to student Veterans in so many ways, but also that there is high turnover. He said they want to improve the broader relationship and longevity of the SCOs, and to find out if they even have enough SCOs. He noted how with the Voc Rehab counselors, they require one counselor per every 125 Veteran students, and should they do something similar with their university partners?

Mr. Hauk said one of the things they have always tried to balance at his institution is that the guidance in the SCO handbook is 200 Veteran students to 1 certifying official. As they enroll around 15,000 students a year, from a financial perspective as a state

institution, he said he didn't feel he would be able to convince the state governor and legislature of the State of Maryland to give him the budget to hire the number of SCOs he would need to meet 200 Veteran students to 1 SCO. He shared that at his school, they try to find a balance with all of the tasks needed to be done by SCOs. He said they are trying to balance getting as closely as possible to the policy mandate as they can with automation and processes and IT.

Mr. Garcia said that he had a meeting recently with his staff and they are going to be moving out with the recommendation to improve the ratio mentioned to 125 from 200, sharing that he hears about that issue all the time.

Mr. Hauk thanked him and said he thinks there's room in terms of discussions with institutions to be able to demonstrate, if they are not at that ratio of SCOs to Veteran students, what are the things they are doing to adequately meet the needs of Veteran students at their institution? He suggested a risk-based survey or compliance inspection or something similar. Mr. Jacobs thanked Mr. Hauk for the feedback.

Mr. Lyon said his question was more directed towards the doctors in the Committee, Dr. Butler, Dr. Haynie, and Dr. Warrick, regarding equivalencies. He asked, within the context of administering student benefits, financial aid, et cetera, is there an equivalent in higher education to the VA's requirement of an SCO? Are there other areas in higher education with the same requirement?

Dr. Butler said they just staff things to the level that makes it work, and that there are a lot of factors involved such as automation, the level of enrollment of the students, if they're residential or online, et cetera. Mr. Lyon thanked him.

Dr. Warrick agreed with Dr. Butler and said at her institution, their SCO works with all the other individuals who handle registration and all of the other steps along the student's path. Dr. Haynie likened that experience at smaller institutions to ROTC scholarship students, where Department of Defense gathers that information themselves and the school doesn't provide it to them.

Mr. Lyon said that, when we think of administering education benefits, and think federally, and then Department of Veteran Affairs, the VA has a lot of infrastructure put in place through SCOs and institutions. He asked if the Committee should think in a reform type of idea when it comes to recommendations about how education benefits are administered by the federal government. Are they still necessary? Are there recommendations that could be made if the process were reimagined? He felt there would be a lot of cost savings relative to the American taxpayer, as the process would be more streamlined.

Dr. Butler shared that he felt he would need to speak to several people in the process to find out answers to the previous questions about how the people are working together to help student Veterans. Ms. Hoppin suggested the modernization subcommittee consider discussing the points Mr. Lyon brought up.

Mr. Garcia said it might be helpful to talk to Joshua Lashbrook about some of the issues being brought up.

Mr. Lyon mentioned how much was being spent for Veteran tuition assistance from the VA and DoD and said the numbers help them to contextualize the work of the Committee and recommendations they shape. He wondered if they have any insight surrounding administrative costs as far as VA education benefits and DoD tuition assistance.

Mr. Jacobs agreed that reviewing that type of data could be useful as far as figuring out how to proceed in a manner that is most conducive to achieving the right types of outcomes. He felt there could be value in doing so. Mr. Lyon appreciated their guests indulging the line of conversation they were having as a Committee.

Chair Dexter thanked Mr. Jacobs and Mr. Garcia for taking extra time to join the Committee's discussion. At that time, Mr. Jacobs and Mr. Garcia took their leave.

Mr. Lyon brought a comment in the meeting's chat to Chair Dexter's attention. He asked Ms. Dyson if the comment could be read into the record and she said as far as she was aware, it would be okay to read it, though it was not the designated public comment period.

Chair Dexter read Dr. January Del Signore's comment. It was as follows: "All, it may be helpful to note that most SCOs are not only an SCO, but wear a multitude of hats within the college/university landscape. NASPA partnered with Purdue MFRI a few years ago and conducted a study of SCOs. The study showed that 60 percent of participants, 1,345, worked in the registrar's and financial aid offices." Chair Dexter thanked her for her comment.

Mr. Hauk shared that larger institutions are more likely to have dedicated people working full time as certifying officials as their only job. Smaller institutions tend to have SCOs who are doing many other jobs on top of being an SCO. Ms. Hoppin said that that information reinforces information they have heard from many family members. Mr. Lyon shared that from his experience, he's also seen many people saying that their SCO getting more support would help improve their student experience but most campuses where Veterans and their family members are attending school are not resourced in that way. He suggested that the Committee explore, relative to modernization, a look at how the benefit is required, both in statute and policy, to be administered.

Mr. Hauk agreed that there is potential room from a recommendation perspective going forward. Mr. Lyon said that whatever that recommendation ends up being, he thinks it would be useful for the Committee to understand what it is just for a knowledge basis. He felt it was worth noting from an SCO vantage point and from students receiving benefits at the campuses when they use language at the VA like "recommended" versus "required". Mr. Hauk agreed that would be important to keep in

mind.

Chair Dexter thanked them for their thoughts and what would be important for them to think about for recommendations and how to make them realistic. She then shared that they had a shift in their schedule, with Nasser Paydar having to cancel their presentation. They agreed to take a break until the next speaker would be presenting.

When they returned, Chair Dexter confirmed the full Committee was in attendance and shared that the DoD update would be moved to the last day of the meeting. She asked if the change in schedule was okay with the rest of the Committee, which would move their discussion further down. At that time, they adjourned the meeting for the day and Chair Dexter informed the Committee she would be sending out notes for the Committee to think about before the next day's meeting.

November 14, 2023

Roll Call

Ms. Dyson welcomed everybody to the meeting. Roll call was performed and she explained the rules of conduct and engagement. She then turned the floor over to Chair Dexter.

Opening Remarks

Chair Dexter thanked Ms. Dyson and welcomed the Committee to day two of the meeting. She reviewed the agenda for the day, stating that they would begin with Committee discussion before the Digital GI Bill Update with Joshua Lashbrook.

Chair Dexter reminded the Committee that recommendations are due at the end of the month, and that they will be going into subcommittee discussions that afternoon and in the next day's meeting. She shared that once they have the subcommittee discussions, the subcommittees will be asked to fine-tune their recommendations based on the discussions for submission. They will then be reviewed to ensure they are in agreement about the number and content of recommendations.

She also noted that DoD had to cancel their presentation for the meeting and they will look into having DoD present for their spring meeting.

Committee Discussion

Dr. Butler said he had an update for the ratio of SCOs to students discussion from the previous day's meeting. He noted that they had spoken about applying a fixed ratio versus what's appropriate for a given institution. He shared how there were three campuses at his institution, with two being traditional in person classes and one being more online based which is a world-wide campus. Dr. Butler said he spoke to several people and what he learned was that the needs of the SCOs vary dramatically between

the two types of models based on the type of work they do or don't have to do based on the population of students and the modality. Because of this, a fixed ratio wouldn't work as well.

Chair Dexter thanked Dr. Butler for the update and said it was definitely relevant as they go into subcommittee updates and recommendations moving forward.

Mr. Hauk added that he spoke with his counterpart who runs the financial aid programs and they staff to a level they need to be staffed to in order to manage the amount of population they have but there is no specific ED guidance as far as staffing levels for SCOs relative to VA beneficiaries at a particular school. He suggested there needs to be an understanding that while the science says one thing about ratios, the art and application are different based on each individual institution. Chair Dexter agreed.

Mr. Lyon thanked Dr. Butler for his update. He said that he does think explaining it as art versus science is a good way to describe it. Mr. Lyon asked if there was a subcommittee already doing work pertaining to this topic. Mr. Hauk said there was not, that it's specific to the conversation around SCOs and ratios. Mr. Lyon suggested a loose framework, that they be intentional on the front end with the science part of it. Mr. Hauk concurred and asked if that's something they should work to get feedback from SCOs in the future. Mr. Lyon felt that was a good idea and that the conversations could also cover how these items are set up at VA and how the funds are allocated.

Dr. Butler concurred and suggested they also include institutions of different sizes including small institutions where SCOs are doing multiple jobs, including those of higher education. Chair Dexter said these were all great suggestions going forward, to figure out what the discovery phase is to then form another subcommittee to create recommendations.

Digital GI Bill Update

Chair Lewis welcomed Joshua Lashbrook from Operations Support and Education Service. Mr. Lashbrook began by showing a timeline of milestones for the Digital GI Bill (DGIB). He shared that new legislation has been introduced, legacy systems replaced, and they are doing their best to improve Veteran experience and drive automation improvements. They've completed seven major releases and retired two of the three largest legacy systems, including VA-ONCE and LTS, which were consolidate into the Managed Service. Mainframe BDN is the last major legacy system to be retired.

He went on to explain how they've streamlined the process of applying for Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits on VA.gov for eligible Veterans and service members. With the deployment of Enrollment Manager, they've streamlined the process for schools to submit student's enrollment with a new user interface and more intuitive designs. They have also deployed Data Mart Analytics Platform to better fit their educational analytics needs to enable data driven decisions, increasing their reporting of efficiency.

Mr. Lashbrook shared that they are working on Benefits Manager, which is the new system for Veterans Claims Examiners to review and process claims. They are focusing on a human-centered approach with the design by utilizing direct end-user input to make the system fit best for everyone's needs. This will also speak directly to all other micro services within the DGIB servers.

Over the summer, his team stood up the Data Mart Analytics Platform to provide education and faster access to data and insights to improve their analytical capabilities. Now, they are able to complete reports that used to take days and weeks in only a few hours with state-of-the-art business intelligence (BI) tools. They also established a foundational infrastructure for AI and machine learning to help expand the functionality as their baseline. They will be adding data sets and other information in the future to expand their capabilities. The Data Mart enables them to have quick insights and get data driven decisions to help drive outcomes for the Veterans and their families.

Mr. Lashbrook shared that since March 2023, Enrollment Manager has provided SCOs an improved process to certify and submit student enrollments. Over 3 million enrollment certifications for all chapters have been submitted from over 14 thousand plus institutions with over 16 thousand active users in the system. They continue to meet face to face with SCOs at events and conferences across the country to hear their feedback to take back and make ongoing improvements to the system. Additionally, they distribute omnichannel training and communications and share updates and other additional key resources.

They also continue to embark on GI Bill road shows to visit stakeholders across the country. The team recently traveled to Georgia and Nevada. Each visit includes a GI Bill Town Hall, an SCO workshop, and a Veteran's Benefits Fair to provide stakeholders key information and answer any questions they have. They have seen a pretty good turnout at the events and attendees seem appreciative for the in-person connection with the team.

He shared that recently, the DGIB work has been recognized with multiple MarCom Awards, an international creative competition that recognizes outstanding achievement by marketing and communication professionals. Platinum winners included Enrollment Manager Workshop (Strategic Communications/Special Event) and Enrollment Manager Teaser Video (YouTube Video). Gold winners included Enrollment Manager Launch (Strategic Communications/Product Launch), and Enrollment Manager Tip of the Week Campaign (Marketing/Email Campaign). They also received honorable mentions for GI Bill Town Hall (Microsite Event) and Enrollment Manager 100 Training (Web-based Training).

Having finished his presentation, Mr. Lashbrook opened the floor for questions. Mr. Hauk asked if the Data Mart tool was available to institutions to use or if it was specifically for employees at VA. Mr. Lashbrook said it's for internal use. Mr. Hauk asked if it might be made available to institutions in the future. Mr. Lashbrook said

there is not currently a plan for it but they're open to hear ideas. Mr. Hauk shared that it would be very helpful from his standpoint and the work he does.

Mr. Hauk then asked if there was a plan for where the road show would be traveling in the future and if there was deliberate thought about what types of institutions they'll be visiting. Mr. Lashbrook answered that there is thought around that and they do have a schedule which can be shared with them.

Dr. Butler thanked Mr. Lashbrook for the update and said that there is a lot of information flow they're trying to manage. As the role of the Committee is to constantly look out for what kind of recommendations and changes can be made to make the experience better for beneficiaries in terms of what counts, how it's reimbursed, et cetera. He asked, when they developed packages of this magnitude, if they sense that it's easily adaptable to change moving forward? Mr. Lashbrook said that down the road, he feels it will be adaptable and is being built in a way to be more modular.

Dr. Warrick thanked Mr. Lashbrook for including small liberal arts colleges like her own institution in their road shows. Mr. Lashbrook thanked her and said they are making sure to include institutions of all sizes and types.

Mr. Hauk asked if there was ever any thought for Mr. Lashbrook's team to go to other types of events like NASPA to have engagement and get feedback from them. Mr.

Lashbrook said they do attend those events already.

Ms. Hoppin asked if they share the road show calendar with military bases and installments as well, and Mr. Lashbrook confirmed that they did.

John Quintas asked whether or not there are proactive efforts to analyze data to understand things in a new way and gain new insights, and if the Committee would have access to the fields and labels of the data being collected? Mr. Lashbrook said they're not collecting anything new that they haven't already been collecting for years, so it's the same data sets that were in VA ONCE and Enrollment Manager.

With no further questions from the Committee, Chair Dexter thanked Mr. Lashbrook for joining them and for his presentation.

Chair Dexter asked Dr. Butler if he would like to go ahead and cover the first issue opportunity for his subcommittee update. Dr. Butler confirmed that he would be willing to do so.

Subcommittee on Distance Learning Discussion

Dr. Butler noted that all subcommittee members were present at the meeting. He shared that they put together four potential actions. The first one is what he said was probably the most significant, focused on the delivery modality. It reads: Higher

education's delivery modalities (online, hybrid, synchronous, asynchronous, face-to-face), schedules (traditional 15-week semester, 6- and 8-week modules, et cetera.) and time to completion have changed significantly since current benefit reimbursement rules were established. In addition, the value of non-degree credentials (i.e., certifications) is real, as demonstrated by job postings focused on skills and not degrees. Therefore, it is timely to review current reimbursement rules against today's range of educational opportunities available for Veterans with the goal of permitting the Veteran to apply the full value of the benefit to their program of study at a rate appropriate to their persistence. Dr. Butler shared that the potential action would be to request that VA conduct an analysis of current Veteran enrollment trends and usage benefits.

He shared that an example would be how on a residential campus they might still use the traditional 15-week semester model, but a lot of universities and other institutions where that traditional semester length is changing. He noted that non-degree certificates are growing in numbers. The goal is to make sure beneficiaries can pursue opportunities and use their benefits to pursue those opportunities. He then asked if any of the other subcommittee members had anything they wanted to add on the first topic.

Dr. Warrick noted that students who are seeking certificates find it difficult to get federal student aid and asked if it was similar for those with the GI Bill. Mr. Lyon said the majority of beneficiaries who use VA benefits are degree-seeking. That notwithstanding, the requirements for degree-seeking students to verify they are degree-seeking is different from how other federal agencies verify degree-seeking. That's why they have SCOs and SSAs.

Ms. Hoppin asked if the terminology is for Veterans or beneficiaries, because it would be more powerful if all beneficiaries were being addressed so that they would have access to data about current enrollment trends for all beneficiaries of the GI Bill. She also said she felt it would have traction because of what's happening socially and that it would be interesting to have the requested information to compare against other trends happening in society. Dr. Butler noted that the wording should say "beneficiary" instead of "Veteran" because that is the data they are looking for.

Mr. Hauk suggested also making sure that they define what they mean by benefit, because there are different benefits tied to the GI Bill. Dr. Butler said that information was very helpful and that he would get back to Mr. Hauk about wording that in a way that would be understandable by the recipients.

Dr. Butler moved on to the second issue/opportunity which has to do with housing allowances. It reads: The growth in course delivery through online and hybrid modalities has grown substantially in the past decade and was accelerated by the pandemic. Online learning is now an accepted and well-respected form of learning in higher education and an increasing number of Veterans are now opting for online classes, as the traditional classroom modality can be impractical for non-traditional

students. Veterans completing courses through online and hybrid formats have the same housing allowance needs as those completing degrees in-person on a residential campus. The potential actions are: Request that VA conduct a comparative study on housing costs for Veteran students enrolled in distance learning programs and those enrolled in on-campus programs. While conducting the study the VA should look at defining the meeting requirements of hybrid and in person modalities. The guidance currently provided is from August 2019 and only gives examples of hybrid courses, leaving schools guessing at what the minimum meeting requirements are when trying to offer modern versions of hybrid courses post COVID.

Dr. Butler said he would also like to learn more about the housing allowance for online summer students that was discussed the previous day. He opened the floor for the other subcommittee members or for questions.

Ms. Hoppin noted that none of them are experts on terminology and that it would be helpful for the Committee to have VA's definitions for hybrid, in-person modalities, et cetera, so they understand what VA is looking for in terms of the GI Bill. Chair Dexter agreed.

Mr. Quintas asked if they knew why the policies were designed to have different rates for online versus campus-based. Mr. Lyon said that he feels it has to do with encouraging beneficiaries to go to traditional in person type schools. He also noted that in 2011, a conversation was had based on a false assumption that Veteran beneficiaries were going to college and not graduating led to a series of policy decisions that were also made based on Congressional budget concerns. He said that ultimately what Congress decided to do was eliminate "gap pay" which allowed the Veteran beneficiary the ability if enrolled full-time in person for a semester and then a second semester enrolled full-time in person, they would continue to receive monthly housing allowance for that time in between. He explained that it was because sometimes there would be two months between semesters if it was a summer break or something like that.

Mr. Quintas said he was curious if there was a correlation between a beneficiary's choice of school and the housing allowance amount given, and if the allowance given influences the choice of education rather than making the choice based on degree program or other aspects.

Mr. Lyon said that from SVA's research, institution choice by the individual Veteran beneficiary tends to be more geographically bound from home of record than most other factors. Dr. Haynie agreed that home of record is what influences the vast majority of institutional choice, or last duty assignment location.

Chair Dexter thanked them for speaking about the first two of the subcommittee's talking points. As the next speaker had arrived, the meeting continued to the policies and procedures update.

Policies & Procedures Update

Thomas Alphonso, Assistant Director, Policy and Procedures, thanked Chair Dexter and began his presentation. He shared that he would be reviewing regulations that are in progress and getting close to going final or are being published as proposed. They would also discuss one policy change and one new policy for implementation.

First, Mr. Alphonso reviewed the regulations that are soon to be published final. He began with 85/15, which has been proposed and gone through public comments, and the comments have been addressed. The final rule is going through concurrence. The 85/15 rule amends current regulation to provide clarity to schools about how to calculate the ratio between “supported” (the 85% in which GI bill beneficiaries fall) and “non supported” students by simplifying calculation; also removes two of four 85-15 waiver requirements (which were not pertinent).

He shared that the definition of “institutional aid” got complicated over the years due to issues of whether something is a scholarship and how it’s counted, et cetera. The new rule simplifies 85/15 for institutions.

Mr. Alphonso moved on to the LSAA Jurisdiction Rule which clarifies and refines definitions of modalities of study; makes regs consistent with statute and clarifies jurisdiction of online program approvals of distance learning courses and SAA approval options and refines definition modalities of study to align with modern education methods.

He explained that this would help the Committee with some of the definitions they were speaking about before he began his update. Additionally, all online training would no longer be defined as “independent study”.

Mr. Hauk asked for a clarification on the de-coupling of independent study and online, and specifically non-credits. He asked if he was correct in stating, if the SAA looks at it and says this is great training, it’s non-credit but it’s online, and as a result of that de-coupling, I can approve that non-credit training for online delivery. Mr. Alphonso confirmed that was correct.

Mr. Alphonso then spoke about the Post 9-11 Improvements Act Regulation which implements provisions of the Post-9/11 Improvements Act of 2010, which modified the manner in which payments of educational assistance are determined and expanded the types of programs students may pursue under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, sec. 1002 of the Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2009.

With no questions, he moved on to the next regulation, which is the Bar to Approve Rule and amends regulations to implement Veteran Benefits & Transition Act of 2018 which requires a SAA (or SecVA when acting as an SAA) to disapprove programs of education at educational institutions that prevent individuals using GI Bill benefits to attend or participate in courses while awaiting payment from VA and/or impose a

penalty on an individual for failure to meet financial obligations due to a delayed VA payment.

The next regulation in development was Approval Requirements for Licensing, Certification and Non-Accredited Programs implementing PL 114-115 Secs. 409& 410, which implemented provisions of the Jeff Miller and Richard Blumenthal Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2016; specifically, adds new approval requirements as specified in the statutory provisions for accredited and nonaccredited programs designed to prepare an individual for licensure and certification in a State, implements VA's new authority to waive the added approval requirements under certain circumstances and adjust the authority of a State approving agency to add new approval criteria.

Mr. Alphonso moved on to speak about procedural updates. He began with Fry Scholarship, sharing that the update as: The assignment of a delimiting date is dependent on when a child is first able to utilize the Fry Scholarship, rather than the Veteran date of death. Therefore, a child who qualifies for the Fry Scholarship based on a Veteran death occurring on or after September 11, 2001, and before January 1, 2013, has no delimiting date if either of the following conditions are true: the child's 18th birthday was on or after January 1, 2013, or; the child completed secondary school (or equivalent) on or after January 1, 2013, prior to their 18th birthday.

He also spoke about DEA benefits, sharing that Public Law 117-328 amended 38 U.S.C. § 3512 to remove the delimiting date and age restrictions for beneficiaries who become an "eligible person" under the Dependents' Educational Assistance (DEA, or chapter 35) program, beginning on or after August 1, 2023. Beneficiaries who meet the new criteria and previously would have been required to elect the beginning date of their eligibility period will no longer be required to make such an election. Benefit payments are payable effective the earliest date possible consistent with existing retroactive payment rules. This will generally be the later of the DEA date, Date of death, or one year prior to when the claim is received.

Dr. Butler asked if the Committee had access to the new approved language at that time, and Mr. Lashbrook answered that it had not yet been published.

Violet Velazquez shared how she is in the National Guard and is a student Veteran and has seen instances where beneficiaries had two Veteran parents who passed away and therefore should be receiving two DEA benefits are not getting either. She asked if there had been any updates in regards to those issues that dependents had been experiencing regarding accessing those benefits. Mr. Alphonso said that he was not aware of the issue but to send him a message with the information of who is not receiving their benefits.

With no further questions, Mr. Alphonso thanked the Committee for their time and took his leave.

Subcommittee on Distance Learning - Continued

Dr. Butler continued his Distance Learning Subcommittee update and discussion, moving on to issue/opportunity 3, which requests that VA provide a status update on training and guidance currently provided for its staff representatives working the Student Education Call Center and the VA School Certifying Official (SCO) Hotline. Issue 4 is similar, and the potential action is to request that VA update VACOE on its processes for communicating education benefits policy changes to both academic institutions and students.

He noted that he would call these two items more requests than recommendations, as they would be requesting briefings on the asked for information. Dr. Butler opened the floor for questions or further discussion.

Chair Dexter thanked Dr. Butler and said they could flesh out how to segment recommendations versus requests for information when they finalize the list of recommendations.

Subcommittee on Veteran Vocational Education and Training Programs

Mr. Roberts began reviewing his subcommittee's notes for On the Job Training (OJT) and Apprenticeships. He shared how there has been a lot of updates and funding for expansion and training and has created tens of thousands of job opportunities throughout the United States and even into Canada. They are seeing a huge increase in pre-apprenticeships for military personnel while on active duty and also Veterans and beneficiaries. There has been an increase in relationships with registered apprenticeship models with community colleges, where they are equating them to associate degrees.

He shared that one of the topics the subcommittee have been discussing is that OJT and Apprenticeships are not being utilized to their fullest extent. They've looked at the data at how many Veterans are utilizing registered apprenticeships or OJT in conjunction with their GI Bill benefits, and how they can expand that. They feel the VA has an opportunity to do so, but they think it's about communicating that opportunity.

Streamlining communications, closing loops on existing programs and communications, and making it easier for constituents to find and utilize resources.

Mr. Roberts noted that it is also important that the opportunity is understood and defined. He said there's a lot of good work from Department of Labor (DoL) Office of Apprenticeship and VETS where they have a great deal of material on OJT, apprenticeships, and vocational efforts, but that information can be expanded upon with joint efforts between DoL and VA. They feel that they need a more clear communication/marketing element to ensure that individuals with Veteran education benefits understand that they can tap into VA benefits at OJT and Apprenticeships.

Specifically, they note that VA and DoL could work on improving their websites so information is more easily accessible and all-encompassing.

He went on to explain that the information is out there, but it can be difficult to navigate due to the information being located in different areas and websites. The subcommittee feels that search capabilities could be improved upon, as currently there is not a way for someone that wants to get into an apprenticeship/OJT to find an employer in their area that is currently approved for a specific program. VA has a comparison tool, but it doesn't allow searching for a specific type of program, only for companies by name to see if that specific company offers the program. He explained that they suggest the creation of a potential search tool to help those that want to utilize the apprenticeship/OJT to find an approved program.

Mr. Roberts shared that November 13-19 is National Apprenticeship Week which unites employers, industry associations, labor unions, community-based organizations, educational institutions, and government officials to highlight the remarkable achievements and benefits of apprenticeships. This year's theme is "Registered Apprenticeships: Superhighway to Good Jobs" which highlights their vital role in economic recovery, equity, and creating pathways to quality jobs. On November 17, DoL is highlighting Registered Apprenticeships for Veterans which involves a webinar where they explain how apprenticeship, DoL VETS, American Job Centers, DoD SkillBridge, and VET TEC can help employers hire Veterans and separating service members. Mr. Roberts asked if any of his other subcommittee members had comments to add.

Ms. Hoppin noted that the genesis for what Mr. Roberts shared came from discussions from the previous meeting. All of their recommendations focus on a user-centered design to ensure the tools are intuitive to use. Dr. Butler agreed with the need to make opportunities easier to find for those who are seeking them out.

Ms. Hoppin asked Mr. Lyon if there had been any decrease in enrollment for traditional universities if some people had decided in favor of OJT and apprenticeships instead.

Mr. Lyon answered that there was actually an increase in GI Bill students, so that was not a problem they were seeing even though across the board, enrollment is going downward because of declining birth rates and therefore less students graduating and moving on to get a degree after high school. Mr. Hauk agreed, sharing that there is also a rise of people who are only wanting to take short-term classes and maybe get an upskill or something like that versus traditional college or even OJT and apprenticeships. He shared how in his state, the requirement for a bachelor's degree was removed from thousands of state government jobs, but the requirements for the skills that came with that degree were still in place which causes some issues with trying to get programs approved that grant those skills required.

Dr. Butler shared that non-degree credentials that benefit people can do so in areas where people have degrees already but they are degrees that are not as attractive to

the current work environment. He said he's seen data that a person with a degree in a certain area without much earning capacity could get certain certifications that can raise the value of that individual's skills.

Mr. Roberts noted that from his current role, he's seeing a lot of core competency training within registered apprenticeship itself. He spoke about the different types of leadership roles within the trades, such as forepersons. He emphasized the importance of gathering the data they can about who is getting OJT and who chooses to only get training for a core competency, and to figure out how many of those are Veterans so they can see the trends happening within the different types of education.

Mr. Lyon requested a definition of foreperson. Mr. Roberts answered that a foreperson is someone who is running an entity or a group which can be from 5 to 50, and it's a type of rank. Mr. Lyon expressed his appreciation of the gender-neutral term of foreperson instead of foreman, and asked if Mr. Roberts noticed if a lot of employers have employee resource groups. Mr. Roberts said there are some, but it's based on different aspects and the size of the group.

Mr. Roberts also mentioned a group that was created called BE4ALL (Belonging and Excellence for All) which focuses on diversity, equity, and inclusion, and Veterans being part of that group and entity itself. He said they were trying to create a template for that type of group and give the basic steps, documents, and platforms to those who want to create a group.

Mr. Lyon noted how Mr. Roberts had mentioned capturing data and specifically asking people if they've served in the military and which branch if so, what their rate was, et cetera, as well ask if they've accessed their benefits. He shared that there are so many organizations that could be also asking those questions and helping individuals gain awareness if they have access to their education benefits.

Chair Dexter agreed that it is the time to leverage private industry, noting the Edelman Trust Barometer which is done annually to determine where public trust lies. She shared that currently it's highest with industry and suggested they ask for VA's communication strategies in terms of collaborative communications in collective media. Where messages are going out, and through whom, and what channels are being leveraged.

Mr. Roberts shared how the DoL has a medallion program in regards to employers and associations and groups that hire Veterans. He suggested the VA create a similar program for companies and groups that communicate VA benefits to Veterans they employ.

Ms. Hoppin agreed and encouraged the information sharing goes both ways, as perhaps the trade associations could share information with the VA as the VA also shares information with them so they can work together to find a way to capture people who fall through the cracks in the system and are unaware of their benefits. She

suggested VA and DoL get insight into the best practices the trade associations have found in capturing some of the Veterans and get them back in the system and remind them of their benefits.

Mr. Roberts noted that the work is done within the associations but also by trade unions who are expanding upon the same efforts and relationships with Veterans.

Chair Dexter asked if there were any other additional questions or discussion for the OJT and Apprenticeships subcommittee, and there were not. She opened the floor for general discussion before their next presentation.

Committee Discussion

Ms. Hoppin asked if the Committee would be doing a site visit trip in the next year and if that was something they should be planning at that time. Chair Dexter said they needed to follow up and find out where that process is currently. Mr. Roberts offered one of the registered apprenticeship locations for a site visit, within or without D.C. Chair Dexter asked Mr. Roberts to look into what that would entail and get back to them. She mentioned that Dr. Butler had also offered to host a site visit, which Dr. Butler confirmed and noted that there may be registered apprenticeship locations in the same area which can be tied in with the site visit as well.

Chair Dexter said they would work with Ms. Dyson to see what needs to be done to get that planned and approved.

Ms. Velazquez asked if, since they were having scheduling conflicts with the DoD coming to them for a meeting, the Committee could go to the DoD. Chair Dexter said that is a possibility if they are meeting in D.C.

The Committee took a break until their next presenter arrived.

Outcome Measures Overview & Updates

Chair Dexter welcomed Pete Spanos from Education Service, and thanked him for joining the Committee.

Mr. Spanos introduced himself as the Chief of Data Analytics for VBA Education Service. He thanked the Committee for the opportunity to update them on the Outcome Measures program. He then explained the agenda for his presentation, sharing that he would be giving a brief overview of the program and then review preliminary findings related to GI Bill usage and graduation/persistence outcomes, as well as details surrounding efforts to augment VA data with external sources, and end with planned activities for the next year of the program.

He explained that Education Service's Outcome Measures program seeks to evaluate the return on investment of the GI Bill through an analysis of education outcomes that

include persistence, retention, graduation, and transfer rates, along with post-education outcomes such as income or student debt and default rates through their external data collaborations. Using a number of demographic, service, and institutional variables, the program will break down cohorts for comparisons that provide additional evidence-based insights.

To accomplish the goals, the program has engaged with Sprezzatura Management Consulting. The approach with Sprezzatura incorporates dedicated institutional research expertise along with data, infrastructure, and operation support.

Mr. Spanos went on to share some of the preliminary findings of their contractual team approach. He noted that recent years have seen a trend of declining numbers of use of the Post-9/11 and Chapter 33. He shared a graph that showed the rate of use from 2009 to 2021. From 2009 to 2017, the number of Veterans and service members eligible to use benefits grew, and the number using Chapter 33 benefits also grew.

From 2018 to 2021, the number of people using Chapter 33 benefits began to decline in the same year that the number of Veterans and service members who were eligible for benefits declined. However, from 2009 to 2021, the rate of use has remained steady, with just over 40 percent of those who are eligible for Chapter 33 benefits using them each year.

He shared that when comparing within gender and racial/ethnic categories in terms of usage rate, they found that service characteristics indicated that those leaving the military with only a high school education had the highest rate of use, as well as those leaving the military at ages 25-34.

Mr. Spanos explained that in terms of education outcomes, they have identified a significant gap in VA internal data due to the requirement that schools report graduations while the benefits are being used. He shared a chart that showed the gap in numbers when comparing graduation rates found in external studies like the Million Records Project and NVEST which both use National Clearinghouse data, with the graduation rate reported by schools that is available within VA data by VA's Performance Analysis & Integrity as well as Sprezzatura Management Consulting.

Based on EDU data, graduation rates of beneficiaries were the highest at private, for-profit institutions. However, for-profits have the lowest graduation rates based on national data.

He continued, sharing that when looking at outcomes by enlisted pay grade, they see beneficiaries in lower pay grades of E3 and E5 having a greater chance of success in certificate programs compared to bachelor's degree programs. When looking at institutional support in terms of retention rate (a beneficiary continuing at the same institution from year 1 to year 2) along with persistence, having a dedicated Veteran education point of contact translated to higher retention rates regardless of institutional level, than not having a dedicated point of contact. For private, for-profit institutions,

the retention rate is 29 percent higher with a dedicated point of contact than without.

Mr. Spanos noted that an important focus for the year in regards to the Outcome Measures program is external data. He said they would be reviewing the Outcome Measures program's efforts to augment internal VA data that will help the program mature. They have identified and are actively pursuing collaborations with several key industry and federal partners for data that can inform their analysis for education and post-education outcomes.

Graduation and matriculation data from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) will help to identify schools and majors that produce the best academic outcomes for beneficiaries. Department of Education student loan and debt data will help identify institutions where beneficiaries can expect to incur the most or least debt. Income and employment data from The Department of the Treasury will help to calculate the GI Bill's return on investment and study beneficiaries' economic standing before and after the GI Bill.

Data involving housing and homelessness from US Department of Housing and Urban Development will gauge beneficiaries' reliance on public assistance before, during, and after using benefits. Department of Labor income and labor force participation data will study the income and employment status of beneficiaries compared to the Veteran population. Finally, income and employment data from Social Security Administration will help them to study the income and employment status of beneficiaries, and calculate the GI Bill's return on investment.

Mr. Spanos shared that, at present, they are furthest along with NSC and the remaining piece is to finalize the mechanism that meets technical and security needs for both NSC and the government. Education department's student federal aid collaboration is waiting for logistics to be reviewed by ED's Office of General Counsel for concurrence. For Social Security Administration, they are approaching the collaboration from an enterprise or umbrella MOU mechanism which would provide data from the National Directory of New Hires to EDU and others in VA. The enterprise/MOU model was recently successfully executed by VA's Office of Enterprise Integration with Health and Human Services, so they are hopeful for a positive outcome using that approach.

They are approaching the IRS data through a special statistical studies request that was identified as a successful approach in the past. Housing and Urban Development and Department of Labor are currently in the outreach stage. He then explained that they are looking at evaluating and leveraging public data sources where possible, such as FCC Census and College Scorecard.

Mr. Spanos shared that the year's research agenda has a number of items the Outcomes Measures program will be looking to complete, including refining a social return on investment model; STEM, VET TEC, and Modality outcomes; enhancing Predictive Model of Retention for individual and institutional factors; and complete a

Stakeholder Engagement Report including the GI Bill Comparison Tool. He shared that he would be happy to give the Committee a brief on future directions at any time. He then opened the floor for questions or comments.

Ms. Hoppin asked if they are measuring the ROI for non-Veteran beneficiaries or only Veteran beneficiaries. Mr. Spanos answered that they are taking a quasi-experimental cohort methodology so they do have a control group of non-Veterans to compare some of their outcome analysis.

Dr. Butler asked how they are separating out those who are enrolled full-time residential students versus part-time online, because first year retention rates are very different between the groups. Mr. Spanos said that in their data, the enrollment certifications do indicate resident hours versus distance hours, so they are using that data to differentiate the modality that's being used in a certification. The modality report is on tap for the year's research agenda is to have the residents versus distance learning identified in the enrollment certifications.

Mr. Hauk said he understands how the data is reported as far as certification in enrollment manager, but if a student is essentially mixed modality, from a data perspective, how are they counted? Mr. Spanos said they do quantify the component of residents versus online. The plan report will need to explore and conduct literature review for best ways to present the way the data is reported in VA data, but they will take into account components and the full scope of residence versus distance.

Mr. Hauk also asked at what point the pay grade for service members are measured, if it is when they leave active duty and start using benefits. Mr. Spanos confirmed that it is their pay grade from discharge.

Dr. Haynie expressed his excitement and apprehension for the social ROI metric and the model being put together. He asked what the metric would be used for in the context of how the benefit is applied, and how they would control for all the diversity in types of institutions and programs in the context of a measure of social ROI.

Mr. Spanos agreed with Dr. Haynie's feelings and said the social ROI aspect of the program is still relatively new in terms of development. They have engaged a subject matter expert on the Sprezzatura team to flush out the model and nuances. He said that he would love to bring back additional information back to the Committee to get their thoughts in the future as it progresses.

Mr. Lyon thanked Mr. Spanos and asked how graduation and success is defined across the studies mentioned, and how those definitions will influence how they are defined within the study. Mr. Spanos said they do have a gap in having complete data since the requirement was to report while the benefit was being used. In their analysis, they're currently looking at the 150 percent normal time to graduation lining up with principles of excellence. In terms of how success is defined, he said he could get in touch with the Institutional Research Team to get a more formalized answer for him.

Ms. Hoppin said she was worried about stakeholders and people outside of the community taking data points out of context. She doesn't want them to gloss over the fact that the GI Bill or promise of an education is in and of itself a recruiting/retention tool. She asked if that narrative would be provided to stakeholders each time they send out data points. Mr. Spanos said they would absolutely be doing so. He also said the products from the Outcome Measures program have not yet been shared publicly.

Ms. Velazquez asked specifically about the data regarding success rates and retention, if there was any focus on where Reservists and National Guard fall in each category.

Mr. Spanos answered that in terms of Reservists and Guard members, they do have that data by their VA/DoD Repository. He said they've created an enclave within the corporate data warehouse where they bring in curated data and be able to make it more efficient in analyzing and connecting to dashboards.

Mr. Hauk said the discussion around graduation rates and what graduation means and how it's measured using data is instructive. He said how they contextualize the data is important. He asked if other organizations would be utilized to help better understand the context behind the data for the stakeholder community. Mr. Spanos said they're still in the process of the stakeholder engagement report piece of the program and invited anybody from the Committee to give their perspectives. He suggested that he ask the contracting team to set up brief, 30-minute interviews and asked that if anybody was interested in that, to reach out to him.

With no further questions, Chair Dexter thanked Mr. Spanos for his time and he took his leave.

Committee Discussion

Chair Dexter asked if there was any further discussion that day for the Committee. Ms. Hoppin shared that she would not be present for the next day's presentation on the Military Spouse Journey Map Project, but that she had been sent the notes. She commended the organization of the report, with them giving the background and areas of opportunity for the VA to reach military spouses.

Public Comment

There were no comments from the public.

Closing Discussion/Remarks

Chair Dexter reminded the Committee of the time for the next day's meeting and adjourned for the day.

November 15, 2023

Opening Remarks

Ms. Dyson welcomed everybody to the third and final day of the meeting. She conducted roll call and explained the rules of engagement. She then turned the floor over to Chair Dexter.

Chair Dexter also welcomed everybody to the meeting and thanked them for their participation and flexibility. She reviewed the day's agenda, noting that the first period of discussion would be used to discuss dates and interests for the spring meeting in terms of speakers, location, information, and presentations.

Committee Discussion

Chair Dexter shared that they would like to propose three dates in March for the spring meeting which would also be sent out via email. It will be three days and in-person. For location, she noted that if they wanted one of the top 3 VA leadership to attend, it would be best to keep it local to D.C. She opened the floor for discussion about the location.

Dr. Butler offered up the facilities at his institution in Florida.

John Quintas shared that this was his last meeting, but offered Amazon's facilities in D.C. for the sprint meeting.

Mr. Roberts said he would be able to get apprenticeships involved in most locations so he can work with whatever is chosen.

Mr. Lyon pointed out that in the past with D.C. meetings it was still difficult to get one of the top 3 to attend, so maybe it would be better to choose the location based on other aspects and ask one of the top 3 to attend virtually instead. He also suggested the facilities located near Dupont Circle in D.C., as many of the groups they talked about during the meeting when it comes to data are located in that area.

Dr. Haynie confirmed that his university is opening a large center near Dupont Circle and that it would be ready in time for the spring meeting. He agreed with the value of VA leadership attending the meetings and also that it's usually difficult for them to attend because of their schedules.

It was decided to look into using Dr. Butler's institution campus in Florida. He said he would need to check with an assistant to figure out the best date for the meeting so there are no scheduling conflicts.

Chair Dexter suggested they work on nailing down the requests for presentations and panelists and other data for the spring meeting.

Sarah Roberts suggested that Cory Boatwright who now runs the LinkedIn Military and Veterans program and launched the 2023 Veteran Opportunity Report would be good to invite to the meeting for a deep dive into the data because of how relevant it is to the conversations they'd been having over the course of the meeting. Dr. Butler concurred with the usefulness of the data.

As it was time for the first presentation of the day, Chair Dexter turned the floor over to Heather Real.

VEO Update on Military Spouse Journey Map Project

Ms. Real thanked Chair Dexter and noted that the information she would be sharing is based on work that concluded at the end of July, 2023. She introduced herself as a Customer Experience Strategist with the VEO, as well as the lead for the project with Barbara Wilson as her primary support in OTED.

She gave a brief overview of the topics she would be covering, stating that the majority of the time would be spent on insights, key findings, and areas of opportunity. She then gave a short overview of the project background and how it started from a recommendation the VACOE made in 2021. OTED partnered up with VEO to apply Human Centered Design (HCD) research methods to build a comprehensive understanding of military and Veteran spouse needs and experiences.

Ms. Real explained that the VEO uses HCD to place a customer's lived experiences directly at the heart of the research. It helps inform the design of products and services in line with the needs of the people using them. HCD includes a phased approach of rigorous qualitative research directed toward the goal of deeply understanding the needs, insights, emotions, and lived experiences of people, and that understanding driving future product or service development. She listed the five phases of the research as scoping, pre-discovery, discovery, design, and implementation, noting that this sprint involved the discovery phase.

She showed a timeline of how the research was broken down into four phases: research planning, military spouse interviews, synthesis, and artifacts. She explained that they conducted 50 total interviews with representation from all components, branches, ages, race, and ethnicities, to try to mirror the total force. They found nearly 2,000 data points, 100 subthemes, 6 insights, 4 archetypes, and created one journey map. She would be going over the insights, archetypes, and journey map with the Committee.

Ms. Real showed a map of the USA with a list of the locations of Veterans interviewed, including some outside of the USA. She shared that they were able to hit their targets within about 5 percentage points except in the age demographic of 30 and below.

However, many of those who were interviewed recounted their earlier experiences,

which helped fill in the data.

She reviewed the research limitations, including: the spouses who participated in this study self-selected and were not recruited from a truly randomized sample. A main recruiting source included survey respondents to a VSignals survey of participants using Post 9/11 GI Bill Transfer of Eligibility and Dependents' Educational Assistance benefits, therefore many spouses we spoke to were already engaged with VA in some aspect. A secondary recruiting source included non-profits and other non-governmental organizations, therefore these spouses tended to be knowledgeable and engaged in resolving resource gaps. Current dual military spouses were omitted from this study as both will default to a Veteran experience. However, two prior service, dual military spouses were interviewed representing unique bright spots and pain points. Surviving spouses were omitted from this study as their transition is characterized by the absence of their Service member and will differ drastically from the spouse journey alongside their Service member. And finally, participants in the study only included legal spouses and may not be fully representative of domestic partners or common-law marriage spouses.

Ms. Real then gave an overview of the insights, which present a nuanced understanding of spouses' needs and experiences, allowing for empathy building and a new perspective. They are written from the point of view of the spouse and may not match the way a service is designed or expected to perform, and serve as provocative statements of truth, inspiring a call to action to drive future design decisions. She noted that there are six insights, and that she would be going through each of them.

Insight 1 is reconstructing identities. She explained that spouses are proud and eager to jump into the military lifestyle and new role, but an unanticipated consequence can be feeling like a third wheel to the needs of the military, lost in the shadow of the service member. Spouses courageously adjust to their new identity, remaining flexible and supportive to the needs of their Service member, their families, and the military above their own. Spouses are proud of their Service member's sacrifices and of their own contributions in supporting their success.

Despite their adaptability and pride, spouses feel their sacrifices are overlooked. They feel lost 'in the shadow' of their Service member, bound by the military culture, and unable to define or pursue their own goals. Spouses often seek out resources to regain this sense of self and are met with a sea of goodwill. Encouraged and hopeful, they set out to discover DoD benefits and other government services, but the information filtered through their Service member, community, or captured through individual research efforts produces little confidence

Ms. Real explained that the ideal state is that spouses would be better informed about their role in supporting the military and provided direct individual support untethered to their service member or Veteran.

She moved on to Insight 2, recurring churn. Basically, change is the only constant in

the military lifestyle which can be difficult to adapt to. The lack of stability associated with the military lifestyle causes anxiety, frustration, and exhaustion as military spouses restart at each location adjusting to the specifics of their new environment or take on additional roles in their Service member's absence. Despite these setbacks, spouses develop a stronger sense of self-reliance, resilience, and fortitude with every life change. They overcome multiple challenges including sourcing quality childcare and finding flexible employment while managing most, if not all, household duties. These challenges are often amplified when they accompany their Service member to over-sea assignments or receive sudden orders to respond to national emergencies.

Whether returning from deployment or separating from service, spouses strive to maintain positive health and mental well-being for themselves, their families, and their Service member. Spouses often navigate resources that help the family reintegrate mentally and emotionally back into day-to-day life. She shared that the ideal state for Insight 2 is that no matter where military spouses are in the recurring churn, reliable, accessible, and relevant support for spouses would be available as they adjust to each change.

Ms. Real reviewed Insight 3, adapting practically. She explained that spouses' aspirations are often delayed and altered due to constraints in the military lifestyle churn prompting them to seek pathways to gain autonomy, stability, and control. Spouses face discrimination and inflexible work environments when job hunting, or struggle to accumulate and complete education for career advancement. While many dedicated resources exist, they can be difficult to access and sustain in practice. Spouses are caught between the realities of military life and expectations of the civilian workplace.

She shared that Spouses often start from scratch or put aspirations on hold with each life change and feel unprepared to support their families. Whether saving education benefits for their children, navigating transfer and eligibility of benefits, or considering education program availability and costs, spouses weigh their options to further themselves against their available capacity. Ever learning and adapting, some spouses successfully utilize education benefits and attain educational goals while others create their own opportunities. They thrive in creative entrepreneurial endeavors, volunteer involvement, or jobs within government-adjacent spaces providing purpose and contributing to the financial stability of their families.

The ideal state for Insight 3 is that spouses would be better accommodated by their employers or educational institutions when they need flexibility, allowing them progress toward their aspirations.

Moving on, she explained that Insight 4 is transition tension. While many military spouses attempt to proactively plan for the transition, their Service member may not approach upcoming lifestyle changes with the same urgency or transparency. Spouses often serve as the bridge between the military lifestyle churn and quickly re-establishing normalcy for their families. This role makes spouses particularly well

suited to lead their families through the final transition.

Ms. Real shared that the data showed that spouses attempt to guide conversations about their (and their service member's) desires for post-military life. However, spouses have variable influence on transition decisions depending on their Service member's engagement. Once nearing separation, spouses realize decisions can now be made based on family needs rather than military priorities. They feel both excitement and anxiety deciding where to live, how to balance new financial realities, and how to ease into civilian life. Living with fewer restrictions, spouses want to fully engage with benefits and services to fulfill their aspirations on behalf of themselves and their families.

However, without full engagement from their Service member and with limited access to Transition Assistance Programs, spouses and Service members make vital decisions with incomplete information.

She noted that the ideal state for Insight 4 would be that spouses have access to the same information and benefits as their service member to help them realize their goals and aspirations as well as inform decisions that will affect their life after service.

Insight 5 is based on community being a resource cornerstone. Ms. Real shared that military spouse communities often provide emotional support and a gateway to resources, but not everyone feels welcome to participate. They found that DoD sponsored family programs or grassroots advocacy groups give spouses much needed information, empathy, and comradery to support them through the challenges associated with the military lifestyle churn.

While most identify proudly as a military spouse, many also feel excluded from the community based on non-conforming identities particularly for those in minority groups, that do not have children, or have careers. Additionally, participation in these communities is more difficult for spouses living further from base or in rural locations, and some may opt out of participation, not wanting to set down roots at that location.

Furthermore, after separation, many Veteran spouses feel "forgotten" and grieve the community they lost.

The ideal state for Insight 5 would be that spouses are able to find an extension of the military community as a mechanism for resource discovery, enrollment, and advocacy.

This disconnect from the military spouse identity or community can cause many to be largely unaware of or believe they are not entitled to pivotal services and benefits leaving many to go without.

Ms. Real moved on to the final insight, Insight 6, pursuing resources aplenty. She explained that military spouses advocate for their families by seeking out and fighting for access to resources despite multiple hurdles. As the primary household manager, spouses are eager to discover resources that help the family's overall financial, health, and mental well-being. Spouses become vaguely aware of a multitude of resources over time, but also have misperceptions about eligibility and enrollment.

Many spouses assume they are ineligible for resources and only engage on behalf of their Service member or Veteran. Coupled with overwhelming, incomplete, or confusing information passed to them, these misperceptions discourage spouses from researching and accessing resources for their own benefit. Additionally, spouses may discover resources are difficult to use or insufficient to their needs, leaving them disheartened but not deterred. Spouses typically discover resources through online searches, post services, or their Service member while others lean on social media communities and non-profits to simplify the process. These outside sources, while unregulated by DoD or VA, provide individualized guidance and tailoring to the family's circumstances, bringing relevancy and ease of use spouses could not achieve on their own.

She shared that the ideal state for Insight 6 would be that spouses would receive timely and relevant information using platforms or tools already familiar to the military community, meeting them on their terms.

Ms. Real moved on to an overview of the Key Benefits Findings. She explained that these findings highlight important patterns they uncovered in their research, but may not have the same type of novel sentiment as the previous insights. They found that two benefits came up time and again as having a significant impact to spouses that were frequently bright spots throughout the entire journey. They include the GI Bill transfer eligibility and the VA home loan. Of the spouse they spoke to, about half had utilized education benefits, and about a third had utilized the home loan program. She noted this was self-reported data and not corroborated through the VA.

For education, service members that do transfer their GI Bill to spouses, it happens most often between the time in service of 6 to 10 years, typically from E-6 to E-8 paygrades. Spouses of lower ranks used the benefits more quickly once they are transferred. The data seems to suggest that the transfer of eligibility may be beneficial to allow earlier in a service member's career, which would allow the space to use the education benefit as a launching point for a more mobile and stable career which would ultimately make a bigger impact to the financial stability of the family.

When deciding whether or not to engage in transfer of eligibility, spouses take in a lot of factors. A lot of them are timeline factors, such as when are we PCSing next, where

are we PCSing to, what is the service member's workload going to look like once we get there? They also have to consider whether to attend an online program or wait until after separation so they can capitalize on the BAH benefit that comes with the Post- 9/11.

She shared that they also heard multiple times that the four-year commitment after that transfer of eligibility is elected is often seen as a hidden cost that they also weigh.

Other barriers expressed included the misperception that transfer of benefits (TOE) is only for children and difficulty with paperwork and process errors, especially when transferring to a different institution. The experience also is based on the VSO at the institution.

Ms. Real moved to the home loan benefits. She shared that spouses who use the benefit expressed being very grateful for the home loan, often using it multiple times throughout their overall career. Some considerations that influence their decision on whether or not to use the benefit are specifically around if they're trying to build a new home as opposed to purchasing a home on the market, as it is more difficult to use the home loan for new home builds. There are other trade-offs with the additional stipulations that can come along with it such as competitive interest rates and the ability to put on a down payment.

Like the transfer of eligibility, the experience of getting the VA home loan is heavily reliant on the knowledge of the third party, in this case inspectors, realtors, and lenders, that can make or break that experience. This can be a challenge in rural communities or ones further away from military bases in general because there are less people familiar with the VA home loan program.

Ms. Real continued to the next topic, the journey map. She explained that for the journey map, they drew visual inspiration from the Game of Life. Military spouses are presented with so many unique situations and obstacles and unexpected turns, so it's not known where they may land. The timeline follows similarly to how the PMA transition journey works, so during duty, transitioning, and adjusting to life.

During duty, there are sub steps such as getting married, adjusting to the military lifestyle, and featured most prominently in a turnstile type area of the journey map is deployments, being home, and PCSing, because those can happen many times during the journey. She explained that above each piece they highlight pain points and bright spots, and below are the more emotional journey quotes and callouts.

Ms. Real called out four moments that matter. The first is during duty, which involves constantly readjusting, how and how quickly the spouse is able to change and reestablish normalcy matters. The second moment that matters is transition, counting down to clocking out. Spouses are just as stressed out by the transition as their service member is, and they need support to prepare as well. However, many times they do not receive that support or they don't receive it in a timely manner.

The third moment that matters is adjusting to civilian life, homecoming hesitancy. She shared that it's important to be deliberate with establishing new routines, as the more a person can plan for, the better. However, there are unanticipated unknowns. The one more frequently heard of from spouses was the unknown of how to mentally and emotionally take care of their service member and kids to help them re-integrate back into civilian life.

The final moment that matters is adjusting to civilian life after being out of service for some time. Spouses continue to provide pivotal household management throughout the entire lifespan even after separation. Their ability to connect with resources after the separation can reduce stress and continue care for the Veteran and their families.

Ms. Real moved on to archetypes which was changed from personas, because spouses will tend to move between the four types of archetypes in the study throughout their lifecycle. They found many spouses manifested every one of the archetypes at some point in their journey. They also did not see any strong demographic ties.

The groupings of the data showed that there were two primary poles in the archetypes. On one side is the level of involvement with the military community, to a more individualistic outset. Then, whether they're more family or career focused. She explained that each archetype has a tagline, a narrative, a list of what they value, what they struggle with, and also what their weighted priorities are.

The first archetype is The Advocate, which is high family ambition, high communal. They value family above all else but the military is near and dear and a second close in their heart. This spouse is constantly volunteering, passionate about giving back to the community.

The second is The Pathfinder, which is high career, high communal. This is a driven spouse to fulfill their own personal goals. They're finding purpose for themselves while also providing for the good of the family. Where they're communal is they tend to find one other budding pathfinder to show them what they did to be successful, and mentor them throughout the entire process.

The next is The Supporter, high family orientation and more individualistic. This spouse is willing to go into the unknown with their service member, they're always there to do whatever the service member's need is for their career or their family.

The last archetype is The Maverick, who are high career, high individualistic. They're proud of their service member but also fiercely independent. They're proud to pursue their own identities and own careers, as well as having their own community and established structure outside of the military.

Ms. Real then moved on to areas of opportunity. She said they recommend four opportunity areas that align with their six key insights for VA engagement and they believe these areas will help improve spouse engagements.

The first is identity and empowerment, to support spouse and partner autonomy through thoughtful service, system, and process design. Some examples are mapping service and system interactions to the spouse perspective to uncover any administrative or psychological burdens that VA may be unintentionally placing on them. Additionally, thinking about conducting research into barriers to the flexibility of VA's own hiring practices and own employee experiences.

The next opportunity area is outreach and onboarding. Many spouses take on the role of household manager and being in or directly involved in motivating and coordinating those use of benefits. The VA can assist the entire family unit by proactively reaching out to spouses and communicating directly to them and providing information and resources. So, tailoring content and communication programs specifically to the spouse. She said they're also trying to look into how they can simplify discovery and eligibility for the spouses using the platforms that already exist like VA.gov.

The third opportunity area is skill building, as spouses are often the emotional bedrock for the family and expressing that desire to "help me help them". The VA could enhance curricula specific to spouses and partners that support skill building in the physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing care they provide to their service member and family.

Finally, community is the last opportunity area. Suggested is the thoughtful creation of spouse and partner communities as a platform to continue resource discovery, maintain personal wellbeing, and build comradery after service.

Ms. Real invited Barbara Wilson to add any insights she had about the project. Ms. Wilson shared that the project was a great opportunity to hear from spouses and their point of view, and she found it very enlightening.

Ms. Real then opened the floor for questions.

Ms. Valezquez shared that they understand from a Veteran and spousal perspective that the quality of resources accessible will make or break the success of the Veteran and family unit. She asked if they would be able to quantify from a data perspective the quality of programs, such as how accessible they are, what type of certifications that individuals functioning as advocates need so that they might be able to standardize in the future the quality of programs available. Ms. Real agreed and said they are just getting started with working with spouses and seeing things through the lens of the spouse. This project was to set the foundation so they knew where the cracks were, so now the cracks can be studied more closely.

Mr. Roberts shared that when he served in the military, his wife faced many of the issues discussed. Now their daughter is an adult and newly married to a Marine, and he said that she is dealing with a lot of the same things.

Mr. Quintas thanked Ms. Real for presenting the project overview and appreciated

how it painted a much larger picture of the entire community.

Chair Dexter also expressed her gratitude. She said she would be interested to see how they as private industry can help with the outreach efforts and sharing the research and helping to educate spouses. Mr. Lyon echoed his gratitude as well.

As the next speaker was present, the meeting proceeded to the next update while Ms. Real and Ms. Wilson took their leave.

Oversight & Accountability Update

James Ruhlman introduced himself as the Deputy Director for Program Management. He shared that he would be giving an overview of the four teams under Oversight and Accountability have been doing, as well as give data for the work they did the last fiscal year and things planned for the current fiscal year.

The first team he covered was the Agreements and Federal Programs Team. They are the team who work the Yellow Ribbon Agreements for both foreign schools and US schools. The Yellow Ribbon Agreements allow the schools and VA to enter into a contract to cover any tuition and fee cost above the academic year cap for a private or foreign educational institution.

This team also coordinates with SAAs, and have negotiated with National Association of State Approving Agencies (NASAA) over a six-month period and implemented the VA/SAA Base Year FY24 (plus 4 options) Cooperative Agreement. This resulted in streamlined and more organized, modified policies. In addition, they implemented Risk Based Surveys for SAAs and assisted in negotiating the change to RBS procedures and forms.

Another part of their coordination with SAAs involved providing training at the National Training Institute and the NASAA Mid-Winter and Summer conferences. They ensured development of new report for SAAs reporting of activities and moved to biannual reporting. They facilitated SAA Oversight visits to Wisconsin, Massachusetts, and Mississippi, worked with the State of New Hampshire to ensure an agency would be designated as the SAA and sign up with VA for FY24, and developed the VA Uniform Application.

Mr. Ruhlman explained that this team also assisted in fully implementing new laws for approval requirements-Title IV, 38 USC 3679(e), and developed and issued Education Liaison Representative (ELR) Job Aids that stream processes, ensuring timeliness for approval processing.

The Agreements and Federal Programs team's plans for FY24 include to develop additional ELR job aids, quality assurance plan for SAA work, work with contractor for review of SAA time and effort for all responsibilities, work with contractor for potential review of allocation model, development of SAA approval checklists, and M22-4

modifications.

The next team Mr. Ruhlman covered is the Federal and State Approvals team. They are responsible for the approval of programs of education that are under the jurisdiction of the VA Secretary as opposed to the SAAs. In FY23, the team completed 1,930 work items and made great progress in the reduction of wait time for foreign approval work from about 130 days to 60 days on average.

Their plans for FY24 are to further reduce the team-wide average days to complete approval work to 45 days, and establish a link to the Education Call Center to provide more accurate information about foreign approval wait times and associated challenges when customer service calls are received about those programs.

Mr. Ruhlman continued to the third team, Integrity and Protection. This team's primary focus is serving as an advocate and representative for Veterans and applicable family members who are receiving education benefits via the GI Bill. This includes, but is not limited to, the following key sections focused on continuous improvement.

Engagement, which involves focusing on providing feedback to valid complaints submitted by Veterans and serve as an advocate for Veterans as appropriate to provide guidance on education benefits, and work jointly on activities with a primary focus of supporting the education service mission.

Risk Analysis, which is to observe, collect, analyze, and report data that is used to form patterns, routines, or behaviors that results in the violation of statute, and/or regulations, and/or policies governing Veteran education benefits. They also plan to conduct an official examination of trends, services, and complaints identified through formal protocols and methodologies.

Mitigation and Enforcement, where they will recommend solutions based on data and research that will make a condition or consequence less severe; collaborate with federal partners, VA field staff, and State Approving Agencies on activities relevant; and take action following the finding of non-compliance with the statute, regulations, and policies governing Veteran education benefits.

In FY23, the Integrity and Protection team received 1,649 complaints through the GI Bill Feedback Tool; of those, 593 complaints were resolved, 70 are currently active, and the common themes included financial issues, recruiting/marketing practices, and quality of education. For the GI Bill Trademark, 151 violations were received and 142 were resolved with 9 remaining pending. In regards to the Principles of Excellence, 9,044 institutions are currently participating and 47 institutions withdrew. Finally, 83 new Caution Flags were posted in FY23.

\

The strategic initiatives for FY24 are to improve adherence with the guidelines of the Principles of Excellence, by conducting an email campaign to those institution encouraging participation; increase compliance with GI Bill trademark by searching

websites for violations; and develop a Standard Operational Procedure when notification of withdrawal of approval from the Department of Education is received.

Mr. Ruhlman moved on to the final team, Approvals, Compliance, and Liaison. They aggressively recruited 34 vacancies, filling 19 Education Liaison Representatives (ELR), 11 Education Compliance Survey Specialists (ECSS) and 2 Supervisory Compliance and Liaison Specialists (SCLS) by the end of FY23. They also implemented ELR Job Aids, conducted 4 Regional Summits, completed 28,047 program approval actions, and reduced Average Days to Completed (ADC) from 41.3 to 21.64.

He shared that this team also provided staff support for the Customer Experience Group. The Compliance Actions achieved include 124 compliance surveys for VA and 1,754 by Saint George Consulting. They conducted 184 Targeted Risk Based Reviews (TRBR), and for Enrollment Manager Requests for access, they approved 8,530 and denied or revoked 1,299.

The AC&L team has shared their salesforce enhancements for FY24. These include mass file upload/download, and expanded capabilities for staff to upload 20 files at a time using drag and drop, preview a list of files in the loading deck before uploading, internal user download capability of up to 100 files or 500MB into a zip folder at one time, and multiple search and filter criteria in the files.

They are also working to enhance the Education File Upload Portal, which is available to as a public URL to support limiting PII exposure of student data from School Certifying Officials and State Approving Agents. VA has created a connection to our internal Salesforce application by utilizing the provided URL. They will create Compliance Documents where the Survey Specialist will invite the Authorized File Submitter by sending the URL and Key along with the request for files/documents to support a compliance survey. In addition, the Authorized File Submitter will be granted access to submit a limited scope of documents by uploading to the Education File Upload Portal instead of emailing to ELR mailboxes. The upload will create a work item in the VA system and land in a queue managed by supervisors.

He explained that the AC&L team also worked on Facilities and Approvals layouts, making modifications to streamline workflow, adding an area to allow tracking work items. Enhancements to the Approvals Workflow is a Phased approach due to the impact to historical records. Phase I deployment occurred in September 2023. The change in workflow and Approval statuses. Phase II TBD in January/February 2024 will further modify the workflow and streamline the "Return" process. In addition, approval reports were enhanced to remove manual calculation of Average Days to Complete and Average Days Pending.

The goals for FY24 include: further develop functionality in Salesforce with a supervisory visit module, referral module, and Yellow Ribbon contracts; conduct WEAMS data cleansing; give manual updates to integrate RBS and TRBR to M22-4

Part 10; enhance SharePoint Website with resources for ELR and ECSS; and host a FY24 AC&L Summit.

Having reached the end of his presentation, Mr. Ruhlman opened the floor for questions.

Mr. Lyon thanked Mr. Ruhlman for the amount of information that was shared. He said that some more information about the trademark of the GI Bill could be interesting as well as the context and asked for some expansion on the topic.

Mr. Ruhlman shared that one of the things that sparked the trademark was the number of websites of dubious value that used the GI Bill name to trick people into giving their information to people who were not actually involved with the GI Bill. The entity would sell the person's information after gaining their information in that way.

Dr. Butler asked for clarification about foreign programs and approval. He asked if those were programs where beneficiaries pursue the full program outside the country, or if it is a component of an already approved program within the United States. Mr. Ruhlman said those approvals are only foreign institutions of higher learning.

Mr. Lyon asked for more information about students studying abroad, whether it's a semester or enrolled in one of the foreign based institutions, relative to monthly housing allowance and how that is calculated. Mr. Ruhlman answered that anybody taking a residence course or sitting in a physical classroom receives the rate for wherever they are taking the classes, which includes a rate equal to the national average of basic allowance for housing rates for E5 with dependents. That rate is the same for international students no matter the foreign country they are attending an institution in.

Mr. Lyon suggested to the Committee that the monthly housing allowance rates might be something to get more information about, with maybe comprehensive monthly housing allowance being the theme for a deep dive.

Mr. Hauk asked if the foreign study monthly housing allowance had been recently reviewed to see if changes needed to be made. Mr. Ruhlman answered that he believes it hasn't been reviewed since before the Forever GI Bill.

Chair Dexter thanked Mr. Ruhlman for his update and work done by him and his team. Mr. Ruhlman thanked the Committee for having him and took his leave.

Public Comments

Chair Dexter opened the floor for public comments.

Dr. Jan Del Signore, Associate Vice Chancellor of Military Affairs at Keiser University and President for the National Association of Veterans' Program Administrators, thanked the Committee for the work they've done in the Veteran space. She shared

her excitement to hear a recommendation for an SCO panel to come to the Committee and discuss some of their trials and tribulations. She noted the recent legislative changes that have required additional duties to be placed on SCOs. During risk-based surveys and compliance surveys, the burden is placed on the SCO and the amount of work and information requested is a lot for one person to handle. The recent changes also give schools less time to prepare for these surveys, going from 30 to less than 10 days for the SCO to gather the same amount of information. She pointed out the negative impact this has on the student Veterans who are depending on the SCO to do their normal SCO duties. Dr. Signore said that any help from the Committee to help address this issue would be appreciated.

With no other public comments being brought forward, the Committee took a brief break before their modernization subcommittee update.

Subcommittee on Modernization

Mr. Quintas began the presentation for the Subcommittee on Modernization's suggested recommendations. He explained that Modernization Subcommittee seeks to understand how the Department of Veterans Affairs is positioned to meet the education needs of beneficiaries out to the year 2030. While the Subcommittee will continue to assess the responses to the Oct 2021 Recommendations, which largely focus on technical improvements delivered by the Digital GI Bill program, it will expand its assessment to understand how the VA is prepared to develop future proofing concepts that prepare the department for changing education needs of Millennials and Generation Z, and improve outcomes that meet the needs of the future workforce, specifically considering changes in hiring practices (e.g., skills-based hiring) and the impact of machine learning and artificial intelligence.

Mr. Quintas turned the floor over to Ms. Roberts to cover the first recommendation, that the Committee recommends that the VA conduct research to understand the post- COVID employment patterns across industries and the impacts on Millennials and Gen Z to better understand how work is changing as employers reimagine the labor market.

She explained that the rationale of this recommendation is that the committee recognizes that the employment trends continue to evolve across the employment ecosystem. To build a more resilient workforce, ongoing shifts will require employees to stay adaptive and relevant to remain competitive, requiring a greater focus on ongoing skills development and upskilling. LinkedIn data projects a 50 percent change in skill sets for jobs by 2027. They believe the findings from this research will influence the VA's approach to marketing and outcome measurement.

For this recommendation, they suggest the Committee requests that the VA conduct further research on: degree and career selection and the long-term employment and access to career opportunities; transition from degree inflation and degree completion as a proxy for employment towards demonstrated skills and competency-based hiring;

employee tenure and frequency of job changes, pivots, and non-linear career moves; growth and contraction of markets and the types of skills that remain employable across industries; and demand for digital skills across all sectors.

The floor was opened for questions before the next recommendation was shared. Ms. Hoppin commented that Ms. Roberts had done great research in terms of the LinkedIn reports available, and suggested that in addition to asking VA to conduct further research, that they also review existing, external research and incorporate that data as well. Ms. Roberts thanked her for the suggestion.

Dr. Butler asked how remote work ties in to the Veteran population and the modality of work, and suggested it may help the Committee to understand what types of jobs are available. This is particularly because many jobs in the digital world are done remotely or by hybrid work.

Ms. Roberts said that was great input to add to the recommendation. She felt the job locations are switching rapidly and can change for the same job where an employee might be remote but be asked to return to or begin to work in the office.

Recommendation 2 was presented by Ms. Roberts as well and states that the Committee recommends the VA conduct an analysis of program availability in the field of Machine Learning and Artificial Intelligence. They recognize that machine learning and AI will change the way people work. As these become more mainstream, the usage will span rapidly across all industries to increase productivity and efficiency.

The suggested requests include: examine the availability of ML/AI skilling offered in higher learning institutions and skills-based programs or certifications; greater understanding of how ML/AI will impact industries, hiring practices and careers; understand how ML/AI will play a role in the path to employment and prepare for how to optimize this technology; explore if/how ML/AI can play a role in accessing and streamlining VA benefits and incorporate this technology into future strategy.

Mr. Quintas recounted how, when cloud-based servers were beginning to become mainstream and be adopted by more companies, it caused a large demand for workers who understood how to work in that space. He suggested that it is going to be similar with more companies adopting ML/AI and that it's important they look at programs being built as quickly as possible.

Mr. Lyon concurred and shared that the topic had come up often in their subcommittee meetings. He noted how historically, VA tends to be slower with creating new programs for emerging job fields and that the subcommittee suggests the VA look at current programs they have to see how they might be modified to work with the new technology.

Chair Dexter said that, from an industry standpoint, she recently heard a panel talking about how ML/AI are impacting the world of work. The projection was that very shortly,

about 65 percent of product development as it relates to software, coding, et cetera, will be done by AI. Therefore, the skills needed are going to be more for the advanced fine tuning of building upon the AI's work.

Dr. Butler concurred with the findings and recent growth of ML/AI and the need for these recommendations.

Ms. Roberts added that the evolution has become how well job seekers in certain spaces can use AI to then unlock their capacity to work in a more strategic way.

Mr. Lyon reviewed their recommendation 3, that the VA conduct research to understand non-utilization of Education Benefits. The rationale of this recommendation is that, despite the availability of education benefits for Veterans, a significant portion of beneficiaries do not utilize these resources. This underutilization represents a missed opportunity for both the individual Veterans and the broader workforce. There are several potential reasons for this phenomenon, ranging from a lack of awareness about the benefits to misconceptions about eligibility or applicability to personal goals.

Particularly, the under-marketing of non-degree programs might be a contributing factor, as many Veterans may not be aware of the full spectrum of educational opportunities available to them, including vocational training, certification programs, and other forms of skill-based education. Understanding the reasons behind this non-utilization is critical to ensuring that all Veterans have the opportunity to fully benefit from the educational resources available to them, which in turn can enhance their career prospects and overall well-being.

Mr. Lyon moved on to the requests that the subcommittee created for recommendation 3. The first is to conduct comprehensive research on the following: Determine the total number of eligible beneficiaries, less the total number of beneficiaries that have accessed their education benefits. Investigate the primary reasons why a segment of Veterans does not utilize their education benefits. This research should encompass various demographics, including age, service duration, discharge status, rank at discharge, and geographic location. Finally, examine the awareness levels among Veterans regarding the availability and scope of education benefits, particularly focusing on non-degree programs.

The second request he shared is that the VA assess marketing and communication strategies, asking them to evaluate the effectiveness of current marketing strategies employed by the VA in promoting education benefits, with a special focus on how non-degree programs are presented to beneficiaries, and identify any gaps or shortcomings in the current communication strategies that might contribute to the underutilization of benefits.

Mr. Lyon shared how the third request involves improved outreach. He explained they are suggesting that, based on the findings, the VA develop targeted strategies to

enhance the outreach and communication efforts of the VA. This could include digital campaigns, collaboration with Veteran organizations, and personalized guidance through VA counselors.

The fourth request under recommendation 3 is to explore barriers beyond marketing. They are asking that VA, apart from marketing, investigate other potential barriers that might prevent beneficiaries from utilizing their education benefits, such as perceived relevance, accessibility issues, or bureaucratic challenges.

He continued to the final request for recommendation 3, periodic review and feedback mechanism. This is asking VA to establish a periodic review process to assess the effectiveness of new strategies and make adjustments based on Veteran feedback and changing needs. The committee requests VA conduct research to understand why some beneficiaries do not use any of their education benefits.

Ms. Hoppin suggested that if they want to get a big picture view of the marketing of the GI Bill, they should look at how DoD is marketing it as well. She noted that only looking at VA marketing might not give them the comprehensive view they need to make helpful recommendations in the future.

Mr. Lyon concurred and said that was a valuable point. He explained that recommendation 3 is more based on non-utilization of the GI Bill versus those who are already using it, so she has a relevant point. Mr. Quintas shared that Ms. Hoppin's comment made him think about organizations that may have a monetary incentive to market the GI Bill because they have some type of profit around it.

Mr. Quintas moved on to review the final recommendation, recommendation 4. They are asking the VA to expand outcome metrics to capture all education benefit use cases. Traditional outcome measurement programs focus on 4-year degree pathways. They assess graduation rates, degree completion, time in program and post-degree employment. They fail to adequately measure the outcomes for all beneficiaries, including those using non-college degree programs, training, OJT, and apprenticeships. Failure to capture all user outcome metrics reduces VA's ability to assess and understand the full scope of programming, and impacts marketing and beneficiary counseling.

The rationale for this recommendation is that there are two strong recruiting trends in the post-pandemic tech industry. These include that tech jobs will continue to grow, and that tech firms are more likely to prioritize skills over degrees in IT occupations.

Mr. Quintas shared that they had three basic requests for recommendation 4. These include that the VA develop a list of personas covering all beneficiary use case; they develop outcome measures for each persona that fully addresses degree program, non-degree programs, training, OJT, and apprenticeships; and that they consider a broader category of outcomes beyond program completion and employment to include future earning potential, access to economic opportunity, and non-financial lifetime impacts.

He noted that there is some data to reflect that service members are not necessarily defining positive outcomes by income or earnings. Because they are a community with high value on service and a life of service, that high earning potential is not necessarily how they would all measure the true benefit of their education benefits.

Dr. Butler shared that the Gallup organization has worked with a lot of universities over the last several years to look at the question and tie it back to the students and experiences they had while gaining their education. The poll is called the Purdue-Gallup Poll. He said it was useful in assessing, once they're out of school, how positive they are about their outcomes. Mr. Quintas said it sounded like it would be useful information to have.

Mr. Quintas also shared how an employer's values and political views are increasingly more important to job seekers who want their employer's views to align with their own.

Mr. Hauk asked if there was any thought into virtual reality and learning modalities within the future of the VA. Ms. Roberts said there may have been discussions on LinkedIn holistically, but when it comes to LinkedIn Learning specifically, virtual reality is not something that is covered.

Dr. Butler shared that he has seen VR utilized in learning spaces that dealt with things like aviation maintenance, air traffic management, and professional piloting. He said they've done research and VR has been effective.

Mr. Roberts shared that there are areas in apprenticeships that are using VR such as HVAC, where they set up different valves, lines, and wiring. Mr. Quintas said they also use VR training at Amazon for things that are high physical risk like electrical tap out.

However, it's not used to completely replace training, only to augment it.

Mr. Lyon shared that the Veterans Health Administration is researching using VR for therapy to help the person be in a specific environment which can help therapy along.

With no further questions or comments, Mr. Quintas turned the floor back over to Chair Dexter.

Closing Discussion/Remarks

Chair Dexter informed the Committee that information would be circulated to them regarding proposed dates, locations, and content for the spring meeting in March. They will also circulate some items in terms of submitting the subcommittee recommendations for final review and submission by November 30. She opened the floor for any other questions or final comments before they adjourned.

Ms. Hoppin thanked the Committee for their productive conversations. Chair Dexter and Mr. Hauk concurred.

Chair Dexter thanked Mr. Quintas for all of the work he has done while part of the Committee, as this was his last meeting. Mr. Quintas thanked her and the Committee and said it was very uplifting for him.

Chair Dexter then adjourned the meeting.

/s/

Mona Dexter

May 28, 2024