



Statement of Travis Horr
Legislative Associate
of
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
before the
House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
November 15, 2018

Chairman Arrington, Ranking Member O'Rourke, and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and our more than 425,000 members worldwide, thank you for the opportunity to share our views, data, and experiences on the important matter of GI Bill payment delays.

Defending the GI Bill is an extremely important part of our work and is highlighted in our Big Six priorities for 2018, along with our Campaign to Combat Suicide, Support and Recognition for Women Veterans, Reforming the VA for Today's Veterans, Support for Injuries from Burn Pits and Toxic Exposures, and Support for Veteran Cannabis Utilization.

According to our most recent member survey, the Post-9/11 GI Bill is an extremely popular program; 90% of our members have used, plan to use, or have transferred the benefit to a qualifying dependent. Out of the vast amount of our membership that have used the Post-9/11 GI Bill, 74% said that they had 'Good' or 'Excellent' experiences.¹

I am proud to say that I am one of those members. I transitioned out of the military in August 2011 and enrolled in classes at a local community college the following week. I went on to be the first member of my immediate family to earn a bachelor's degree. The Monthly Housing Allowance (MHA) allowed me to focus on my studies and not have to worry about the additional stress of how I would pay for rent, utilities, or food. The importance of the Post-9/11 GI Bill in my life and the lives of over 1.5 million veterans who have used it cannot be understated.² It has set me up for a lifetime of success and opened up doors that I would have never been able to achieve or never thought possible.

¹ iava.org/survey

² <https://benefits.va.gov/reports/abr/index.asp>



Not only is the Post-9/11 GI Bill the reason I am able to work for IAVA, it's also the reason I chose to work at IAVA. IAVA led the charge in 2008 to pass the first Post-9/11 GI Bill; their leadership in 2008 to spearhead this landmark legislation was extremely important. For the next decade, IAVA fought for and defended the Post-9/11 GI Bill: from advocating for the *Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Improvements Act* passed in 2010 to defending the GI Bill against cuts and taxes in 2016 and 2017. Additionally, 88% of IAVA's members believe that the Post-9/11 GI Bill is either 'Extremely Important' or 'Important' to transitioning servicemembers and almost 90% oppose any cuts to the benefit, which is why IAVA's continued effort to Defend the GI Bill from cuts, waste, and abuse will last long into the future.³

In August 2017, with the backing of IAVA and many other Veterans Service Organizations, the *Harry G. Colmery Educational Assistance Act*, otherwise known as the Forever GI Bill, was signed into law and marked one of the largest expansions of veteran educational benefits since the original GI Bill in 1944.⁴ This expansion created a need for updated IT infrastructure within the VA to address new provisions in the law, such as modified MHA payments. According to the legislation, the VA had a deadline of August 1, 2018 - one full year after passage - to implement these changes, and as of this hearing, the VA has yet to do so.⁵

In September 2018, IAVA became aware that scheduled MHA payments had been inaccurate or missing. On September 14, IAVA sent a letter, along with 14 partner VSOs, to the VA expressing our disappointment in the Department's IT failures.⁶

For the first time, on October 10, well into the Fall semester, the VA publicly acknowledged longer than normal processing times on their website and gave instructions for students who were experiencing financial hardships, such as falling behind on rent, utilities, or other important bills.⁷ This left students with no official explanation as to why they were unable to receive their benefits for nearly two months. The VA also left students with no timeline of when they would realistically be able to expect MHA payments, leaving students unable to properly plan their finances and adding undue stress to their semesters. We've heard about this first hand; student veterans have contacted IAVA's Rapid Response Referral Program (RRRP) that waited

³ java.org/survey

⁴ <https://veterans.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=2227>

⁵ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/veterans-haven-t-receive-gi-bill-benefits-months-due-ongoing-n-934696>

⁶ http://studentveterans.org/images/pdf/will/Forever-GI-Bill-Delays_VSO-Letter-.pdf

⁷ <https://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/>



two months for their MHA payments and finally received them this week and another student veteran who had to drop a class because they could not afford their textbooks. To the student who had to drop a class due to the VA's mistake, the VA informed the student it will no longer reimburse the class and instead recommended that the student receive an "F," damaging their GPA. As a former student veteran that relied solely on these MHA payments, I can say that all of these examples are not over exaggerated, as I would have experienced them first hand.

The VA has been aware of these IT challenges since July 2018.

In response to these delayed payments, VA implemented mandatory overtime and hired more processors to address the backlog. In addition, VA notified students with delayed GI Bill and MHA payments of the backlog while also ensuring that no veteran that had been overpaid would be fined or required to repay inaccurate GI Bill payments. While the VA has implemented steps to decrease and eliminate these delayed payments going forward, IAVA and partner VSOs remain concerned by the VA's late response time and lack of overall communication on this issue. If the VA was able to effectively communicate these potential issues to students, School Certifying Officials (SCO), school leadership, and stakeholders then all parties would be able to make informed decisions on how to best deal with a potential financial hardship in order to give a student veteran the best chance of success during the Fall semester.

We are also deeply concerned about these payment issues compiling into similar or greater issues in the Spring semester. It is on that end that IAVA recommends two points of action: first that the VA immediately pay backlogged GI Bill benefit payments and secondly that the VA increases overall communication on similar issues going forward.

Moving forward, the first priority needs to be ensuring that all backlog cases of nonpayment are processed. There are currently 82,000 student veterans that are being adversely affected through inaccurate or delayed payments.⁸ This is simply unacceptable and must be fixed immediately. IAVA also hopes to see the VA stand by their word of not punishing students for overpayments that have occurred to no fault of the student.

It is imperative that the VA communicates any potential issue to the correct people in advance of the problem in order to decrease the overall negative impact. By working not

⁸<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/veterans-haven-t-receive-gi-bill-benefits-months-due-ongoing-n-934696>



only with SCOs but other key school administrators, schools would have been better prepared to help students facing financial hardships or delayed tuition payments. Schools were unable to respond to delayed payments in a timely manner due to a lack of overall communication from the VA; expanding communication to key stakeholders at schools around this issue will aid in supporting student veterans that are impacted by these technical issues.

Looking forward to the Spring 2019 semester and beyond, the VA needs to begin planning and communicating their Spring 2019 plan now. As schools begin their enrollment of students they need to be assured that the VA will be able to pay their GI Bill benefits in full. Additionally, students need to be assured that they can rely on a proper MHA stipend from the VA in order to attend school. This is a benefit that has been earned with the student veterans' service and should not be in doubt.

More broadly, IAVA calls on the VA to update their lagging IT infrastructure. This is an unfortunate recurring problem across all of VA that hampers more than just educational benefits. However, for this to happen Congress must provide appropriate funding and the VA Secretary must continue to make modernization efforts a priority VA-wide. Finally, there must be steady leadership at the helm to ensure these technological changes are done in the proper way. Thus, the Senate must confirm an Assistant Secretary for Information and Technology, a position that has been left vacant that could offer leadership on these issues.⁹

Again, I thank the Chairman and Members of the Committee for inviting me to express IAVA's views on this critical issue and we look forward to working with you.

Biography of Travis Horr

Travis Horr serves as a Legislative Associate, assisting in IAVA's advocacy efforts in Washington, D.C. Prior to IAVA, he worked at a consulting firm, as well as political campaigns in both Maine and Delaware. Travis served in the Marine Corps Infantry for four years and was stationed at Marine Barracks 8th & I in Washington D.C., and Camp Pendleton, CA. He deployed to Helmand Province, Afghanistan in 2010 in support of OEF. Travis is a Maine native and graduated from the University of Southern Maine with a B.A. in Political Science with Honors utilizing the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

⁹ <https://www.veterans.senate.gov/hearings/pending-nominations-oawp-cio-09052018>