



**MONTANA
STATE UNIVERSITY**

Veteran Services

STATEMENT OF

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MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY

BEFORE THE

SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

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Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Moran, and members of the committee. I am pleased to be able to join you remotely today from the great state of Montana to discuss a range of topics related to veterans' education and transition from the military. I would also like to share feedback on the VA response to challenges posed by the COVID 19 pandemic to the administration of VA educational benefits. I would like to share with you the ways in which we serve veterans at Montana State University as they make the decision to separate from the military and begin the transition process to being a student and a civilian again. Finally, I would like to share with you some of the challenges we continue to face as veterans in Montana and those we face as school certifying officials and directors of programs designed to empower veteran success after the military.

I am a proud fifth generation Montanan, raising a sixth generation in the same valley my family has lived since before Montana was even recognized as a state. Montana State University (MSU) is located in my hometown of Bozeman, and was established in 1893 as the land grant university for our state with a mission of access and educating the sons and daughters of Montana. This includes serving those who have served by assisting and empowering our veterans and their families as they transition from the military. We wholeheartedly believe in the transformative power of higher education: the power to alter one's course for the better, to break generational bonds, and to give tools to Montanans to pursue their dreams and aspirations for themselves and their families.

In a state that boasts one of the highest percentages of veterans per capita, Montana State University has long answered the call to serve our military men and women as they trade in their uniform and boots for a backpack. This fall we are celebrating our ten year anniversary in our current Veteran Support Center, and next month, will be cutting the ribbon on a new center that will be almost three

times the space we currently occupy. We have named the center after our hometown hero, SSG Travis W. Atkins, a Medal of Honor recipient who gave his life in Iraq to save the lives of the men he was leading. Both in our current space, and in our new space, MSU has invested in the success of student veterans by ensuring they have access to tutoring, mentoring, advising, and mental health counseling, all at no cost to the student veteran. Besides dedicating a space for veterans to come and access resources, MSU has dedicated two full time staff members who focus only on the retention of student veterans and their families, and the accurate and timely administration of the benefits they have so rightly earned. It is critical to have a space for these students, but even more important, is for them to have people they know they can turn to for advice and advocacy. This past February, MSU was recognized as one of the top ten most military friendly universities in the country among our peers. We are incredibly grateful to our university administration, to the state of Montana, and to the Department of Veterans Affairs for giving us the tools we need to serve our veterans with excellence.

This work does not come without great challenges as you are well aware. I am often asked to speak on the challenges student veterans face as they pursue a degree at MSU. I often tell my story as I am a product of the very center I have the incredible honor of leading today. I am a veteran of the United States Army, and after a decade of service, made the decision to separate from the military to spend more time with my family. I am also a first generation college graduate so the higher education environment was something very foreign to me. I decided to take a chance on enrolling at MSU because I had heard that an education could change your life and I needed to be able to provide for my family. The staff at the Veteran Support Center was there from day one, and walked beside me over the next four years, providing all the services and resources mentioned earlier, until I walked across that graduation stage. People often ask if our identity as veterans disadvantages us in higher education. I reply with a resounding no. Our identity as veterans, and the values we learned and honed in the military, set us up for success. Where our struggles often lie are in our shared identity as non-traditional aged students. Coming back to the classroom after having taken a decade off from being in that type of learning environment was a culture shock to say the least. I had to knock off the dust and rust and learn how to be a student again. But I wasn't alone: MSU and the community I found in the Veteran Support Center were there beside me, encouraging me and supporting me and my family. Many of us are raising families as we pursue our education, and this can cause conflict and challenge that our traditional aged colleagues don't often face. Having knowledgeable advisors and advocates on campus was the difference between success and failure for me.

This is the model being adopted and replicated around the country because it works. Some veterans separate from the military with injuries, scars, and traumas that also must be addressed as they transition and move on to the next chapter. PTSD, TBI, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse are issues some of our veterans are fighting as they transition. When you stack that on top of raising and financially supporting a family, all while pursuing challenging coursework at MSU, the task becomes daunting at best, and near impossible at worst. If it were not for the educational and other benefits administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the services provided locally by communities and universities, the business of transitioning veterans from the military to higher education would be a losing battle. But I join you today, a success story of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, and an example of what can happen when federal and state entities come together with one purpose: the healthy and successful transition of veterans. My family's trajectory has completely shifted thanks to the land grant mission of

Montana State University and the support of the Department of Veterans Affairs. And for that I want to say thank you.

As we look back at the spring semester of 2020, we faced challenges in higher education not seen in many generations: a global pandemic. At MSU, we had just left for spring break in the middle of March when COVID 19 made its way to Southwest Montana. In less than a week, we made the decision to not return to face to face learning, and to finish the semester in a virtual environment. The enormity of this undertaking was incredible, and I still stand in awe of the work we were able to accomplish that semester. As VA school certifying officials, we knew that there would be immediate and devastating impacts to the administration of VA educational benefits by switching from an in person modality to all online. The housing stipend, that is the lifeline for many of my families, is based on zip code, rate of pursuit, and modality. In Bozeman, Montana, our students would be receiving half of what they normally would receive based on the policy at that time. Communication of the issue was swift and accurate, legislation was drafted and signed into law, and policy was shared out in an incredibly timely manner that staved off this enormous problem. Not a single student at MSU was negatively impacted by that transition, and I want to thank all of you who were involved in that speedy intervention. You literally saved student veterans that semester. I look to this incident as a shining example of the work that can be accomplished when we communicate, when we share information, and when we listen without being defensive, knowing that we all want what is best for our veterans at the end of the day.

Because of the pandemic, many businesses had to close temporarily; the types of businesses that employ college students. This meant that my student veterans were not bringing in the income needed to afford the cost of living in an expensive college town like Bozeman. I applaud the decision by VA to suspend debt collection during that trying time which allowed student veterans to take what funds they did have and allocate them toward their greatest need. I would encourage VA to reach out to communities across the country, as many continue to be afflicted by another surge of the pandemic, to understand if the time is right to reinstate the collection of those debts. It is also my understanding that while many universities like MSU have returned to in person learning, other colleges maintain many virtual learning environments due to safety. As some policies near their life cycle as it relates to modality, I would encourage VA to ensure we are not putting students in financial hardship positions because of health and safety decision made by universities.

While many communities across the nation still struggle with the effects of COVID 19, we continue to look forward and anticipate challenges on the horizon. There have been a few pieces of legislation drafted and signed into law that have changed the way we do business as school certifying officials. The Colmery Act, and more recently the Isaakson and Roe Act, have led to the implementation of policies that have changed many things in the administration and certification of VA educational benefits. Most of these changes have been very welcomed and have greatly benefited our students. However, some policy changes or updates have been quite challenging to implement due to timelines, communication, and training. We have seen great improvements in customer service over the past six months and the staff who answer hotlines have been incredibly helpful. I think what many school certifying officials are asking for is more timely training that sets us up for success as implementation deadlines loom, and more staffing at the ELR level as that tier of leadership and management appears to be incredibly stretched thin. These are the individuals who work with school certifying officials everyday on certification, implementation, and compliance, and they need more help. While the states of Montana and Wyoming are not our most populous states, I do not think our ELR colleagues have the staffing they

need to better partner with VA approved institutions like MSU. They act as our advisors, our interpreters, and help bridge the gap between VA and the local institution serving veterans.

Many veteran support programs are adapting and pivoting to serve the students we see today. After 20 years of serving combat veterans, we have been seeing fewer and fewer veterans with oversea combat experience. We are also seeing more students using transferred benefits from their parents. While the number of students with combat experience is down, the demand for mental health resources continues to rise. Besides the issues of PTSD, depression, and anxiety mentioned earlier, COVID 19 has had a serious impact on mental health and the ability to transition to civilian life. In the state of Montana, the issue of mental health and access to resources becomes even more dire. Our state has held the unfortunate position of being one of the top states when it comes to suicidality for many years. Long winter months, infrastructure, culture, and the rural nature of our state can all pose barriers to accessing the resources needed to combat the statistics. When you add on the challenges that veterans face, the importance of breaking down barriers to accessing mental health resources becomes one of our primary responsibilities every day. The recently published VA report on National Veteran Suicide Prevention showed signs of hope and progress. But we cannot become complacent. Now is the time to ramp up efforts, to train community members to recognize warning signs and make referrals to resources, and to build better infrastructure that allows access in today's day and age. Changing culture is hard work, but we do that work every day at MSU to normalize self-care and promote healthy help seeking behaviors. Culture change often happens at the grassroots level and we will continue that work. All we ask is that our partners are there to ensure resources and services are available and accessible once a veteran reaches out for help. We are grateful to hear that much improvement has been made during the handoff of the service member between the DOD and VA. However, we feel more can be done to better prepare service members for life outside the military before they separate. More training, access to resources, and referrals to organizations and institutions will better ensure a successful transition.

I know I shared a lot today, but that is how committed we are to serving veterans at MSU. Retention, graduation, health and success go beyond the certification process of VA educational benefits. We remain committed to the work, and are grateful to have partners in this work. Thank you Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Moran, and members of the committee, for allowing me to speak with you today. Thank you for your dedication to serving those who have served. Please do not hesitate to reach out if I can provide any clarification or further information.