

Date: 5/19/2019

To: United States Senate
Committee on Veteran Affairs

From: James Powers

Subject: Statement of support for S. 805 Veteran Debt Fairness Act of 2019

Here we are, 18 months after I came before this Committee and gave a veteran's perspective of VA services in Ohio. Never did I expect that elements of my field hearing on a November day in Columbus, Ohio would find their way into purposeful legislation to prevent unnecessary hardship for Veterans. S. 805 puts measures into place to prevent financial hardship on Veterans that incur from an overpayment of benefits. The current policies in place provide little protection the Veteran. The appeals process is one-sided, and the collection processes is a nightmare. In my own case that I spoke of in my testimony, had an audit process been in place my debt far more easily could have resolved itself. If the VA's IT systems allowed for a veteran to make dependency changes that immediately updated benefit amounts, many of these overpayments could be avoided. This bill is as much about helping Veterans as it is about improving the agency that is here to serve Veterans. It is common sense to want a government agency to do a better job handling this country's money. Especially when it is for our Veterans. Error or not, government money should not be able to cause a hardship. The VA is currently doing just that by not automatically capping monthly repayment at 25%. Had the VA followed their normal debt collection method in my case, I would have went 3+ months with no benefits payments. This easily would have caused me to need emergency financial assistance. That assistance would have come from state and local resources. Resources that could be better appropriated to helping veteran homelessness, suicide prevention, and outreach. But instead it gets used to pay rent or utility bills for the Veteran who getting all of his disability compensation garnished. It seems counterproductive when you look at it like that. Especially when the solution

is right here in this bill. Section 3 of this bill builds on a practice already in place to prevent overpayment of DOD and VA benefits. Currently, when a servicemember retires the DOD automatically verifies VA compensation amounts to prevent overpayment of retirement benefits. With this bill, the DoD would quarterly verify Drill pay for guard/reservist to the VA. This simple reconciliation would remove the reporting/recording issue facing the Veteran/VA. No longer would the VA find itself recouping benefits that occurred over a long period of time. Many of these policies are not new to the federal government. They exist in similar context within the Social Security Administration. Many of these debt collection practices also come straight from similar protections a Veteran may find when dealing with a private debt and the CFPB. So I ask this committee to continue "to not let my words fall upon deaf ears" as I said in my previous testimony, but to work towards making S. 805 Veteran Debt Fairness Act of 2019 the next law showing this country's continued commitment to honor, care for, and in this case, protect its Veterans.

Previous Committee testimony:

<https://www.veterans.senate.gov/download/powers-testimony-11212017>

Signed,

James Powers