

**SAM SHELLENBERGER
DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY
VETERANS' EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR**

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

HEARING ON PENDING LEGISLATION

**U.S. SENATE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

June 15, 2017

Introduction

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Tester, and distinguished Members of the Committee: thank you for the opportunity to provide a statement for the record of today's hearing. I commend the Committee for its tireless efforts to ensure that America fulfills its obligations to our Veterans, their families, and their caregivers. The Department of Labor (DOL or the Department) also works each day to help ensure all Veterans have the opportunity for meaningful long-term employment.

The Department is the Federal government's leader on training and employment services. DOL has the expertise and the nationwide network to facilitate employment opportunities and skills training for anyone who needs them, including Veterans. The Administration relies on the Department's integrated network and programs to provide positive employment outcomes for the men and women who serve our country.

While this hearing is focused on several bills under consideration by the Committee, I will limit my statement specifically to S.1218, the "Empowering Federal Employment for Veterans Act."

S.1218, the "Empowering Federal Employment for Veterans Act of 2017"

S. 1218 seeks the establishment of Veteran employment programs within Federal agencies. This bill would require each "covered" Federal agency (including DOL) to either establish a Veterans Employment Program Office, to be managed by a Veterans employment official, or to designate an employee of the covered agency to carry out a Veterans Employment Program for the covered agency; the agency also must ensure the public availability of contact information for Veterans' employment officials to ensure engagement with prospective applicants. The bill also would establish an Interagency Council on Veterans Employment to handle matters relating to the employment of Veterans. The Council would be co-chaired by the Secretaries of Labor and Veterans Affairs, with the Director of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) serving as the Vice Chair. The Council's duties would include advising and assisting the President and the Director of the OPM on matters involving a coordinated Government-wide effort to increase the

number of Veterans employed by the Federal Government in positions that match the skills and career aspirations of Veterans; this would involve enhancing recruiting, hiring, retention, training and skills development, and job satisfaction. The Council would establish performance measures to assess the Federal government's effectiveness in these areas. Additionally, the Council would serve as a national forum for promoting employment opportunities for Veterans in the Executive Branch. Finally, the Council would report on the effectiveness of these efforts to the President and to Congress within one year of the bill's enactment, and annually thereafter.

DOL, along with other Departments, established a Veterans Employment Program Office pursuant to Executive Order 13518 in November of 2009. Since that time, the Department has increased representation of Veterans in its workforce from 17 percent in FY 2009 to 21.3 percent in FY 2015, and disabled Veterans' representation has increased by approximately 5.3 percentage points during the same period for the overall workforce.¹

In comparing DOL's workforce representation of Veterans and disabled Veterans against Comparable Federal Agencies (CFA), DOL's percentages of representation exceed those of the CFA. Since the inception of the Veterans Hiring Model, approved in FY 2015 by the Council on Veterans Employment (also established pursuant to Executive Order 13518), DOL has maintained an Exemplary Performance Rating for increasing Veteran hiring. These hiring practices are similar to those for private sector employers to receive recognition under the HIRE Vets Medallion Program, as established in the HIRE Vets Act of 2017. The HIRE Vets Act requires the Department to establish a HIRE Vets Medallion Program to recognize employer efforts to: (1) recruit, employ, and retain Veterans; and (2) provide community and charitable services supporting the Veteran community. The Department continues its work to establish this program, and looks forward to updating the Committee on its progress.

We note also that, through the efforts of the existing Interagency Council on Veterans Employment, comprising some 24 Federal agencies, Veterans' share of new hires in the Executive branch has increased from 24 percent to 32.5 percent—an unprecedented increase in Veteran hiring.² This has been achieved through the Council's establishment of a strategic plan and Veterans' hiring model in the Executive branch, as well as through establishment of performance measures to gauge the success of those efforts. The Council has afforded each of those agencies a role in oversight of programs affecting Veteran hiring and employment and a forum to discuss topical issues, address and resolve problems, and make better informed policy recommendations.

Additionally, the Department provides training and employment services for Veterans and transitioning service members who may be interested in a career with the Federal government through its Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS). VETS' mission is focused on four key program areas: (1) preparing Transitioning Service Members for meaningful careers through the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Employment Workshop and Career Technical Training Track; (2) providing Veterans with employment resources and expertise at the nearly 2,400 American Job Centers across the country; (3) protecting Veterans' employment rights with administration of the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act

¹ See OPM FY 2009 and FY 2015 Reports on *Employment of Veterans in the Federal Executive Branch*

² *Id.*

(USERRA) and Veterans Preference in Federal Hiring; and (4) promoting the employment of Veterans and related training opportunities to employers across the country through our national employer outreach effort. VETS is able to accomplish its mission by working closely with other parts of the Department, including, for example, the Employment and Training Administration (ETA), which administers programs under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act that provide employment and training services, and give Veterans (and qualified military spouses) priority of service status. DOL's Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs also supports the hiring of Veterans through the Vietnam Era Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act (or "VEVRAA"). VEVRAA prohibits companies that are doing business with the Federal government from discriminating in employment against protected Veterans, and requires that these employers take affirmative action to recruit, hire, promote, and retain these Veterans. The progress of covered contractors is measured against an annual hiring benchmark. Together, these DOL programs provide a unified approach to serving the employment needs of Veterans, transitioning service members, and their families.

The bill also would require the Secretary of Defense, in consultation with the Director of OPM, to make needed modifications to the SkillBridge initiative to enable Federal agencies to participate in the initiative as employers and trainers—including the provision of training by Federal agencies under the initiative to transitioning members of the Armed Forces. The Department of Defense's (DoD) SkillBridge initiative promotes the civilian job training authority available for transitioning service members; service members who qualify can participate in civilian job and employment training, including apprenticeships and internships. Under the bill, the Director of OPM, in consultation with the Secretary of Defense, would be required to take necessary actions to ensure that each Federal agency participates in the SkillBridge initiative.

DOL fully supports expanding the SkillBridge initiative to include Federal agency participation, as this would further broaden employment and training opportunities for transitioning service members, and serve as a pipeline to enhance the Federal civilian workforce. Since the inception of SkillBridge, the Department has been working with DoD to help communicate the program to both transitioning service members and employers. The Department supports using the SkillBridge authority to provide transitioning service members access to and experience in Federal employment opportunities before they transition out of the military, which would enhance their ability to successfully reintegrate into civilian life.

Conclusion

DOL's focus on employment is part of our core mission and competency. Creating opportunities for our Veterans to thrive in the civilian economy through meaningful employment is a priority for DOL, and we work closely with our partners at the Departments of Veterans Affairs and Defense to do so. The Department looks forward to working with the Committee to help ensure that our transitioning service members and Veterans, and their families, have the resources and training they need to successfully transition to the civilian workforce. Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Tester, distinguished Members of the Committee, this concludes my statement for the record. Thank you for the opportunity to be a part of this hearing.