

SVAC Legislative Hearing: S. 3021

- In 2010, Congress passed the Post 9-11 Veterans Educational Assistance Improvements Act. This Act authorized veterans to use their hard earned educational benefits to pursue a technical or career certificate program as an option instead of the traditional liberal arts opportunities at a college or university.
- Career technology centers, or CTEs are *public, non-profit*, non-degree granting institutions that provide skills and certificates important to every community and are found in over ten states.
- The city of Enid, Oklahoma has been home to the Autry Technology Center since 1967 and serves over 10,000 people annually through programs and services that enhance skills and employment opportunities.
- Autry currently offers 26 full-time career programs from air conditioning to culinary arts, to radiography, to welding, and several other critical, applied skills used nationwide.
- Public, non-profit centers in the Oklahoma Career-Tech system, like Autry Technology Center in Enid, are proven to significantly contribute to the economic development and quality of life in Oklahoma, especially our returning veterans.
- Career and technical education centers are vital as a post-secondary education option and workforce training system for our veterans, but the administration recently took action to block certain tech center benefits from our vets.
- Since March, the VA has not allowed the post 9-11 GI Bill to pay for any form of independent study from a non-degree producing institution, including CTEs.

In many cases, this hindrance precludes veterans from utilizing these courses or pursuing these certificate programs.

- CTEs, much like their college and university counterparts, are utilizing internet based courses as a component of their programs to provide flexibility for working adults and veterans to better accommodate their lifestyles and encourage learning.
- Unlike colleges and universities, however, CTEs are not technically degree producing, and so the VA is preventing the use of GI Bill funds for any CTE program that has an independent study component.
- Marcie Mack, the State Director of the Oklahoma Career-Tech system, told me last week that, “Oklahoma’s Career-Tech system is committed to serving U.S. military veterans; however, with current federal policy there are obstacles for our veterans to be able to participate in Oklahoma’s Career-Tech system and receive their benefits.”
- To address the current policy issues, I have introduced S. 3021 along with Sen. Lankford, clarifying the law to ensure *accredited* CTE programs can continue to receive GI Bill benefits even if a portion of the program is done by independent study.
- In the time since I introduced this legislation, I have heard concerns from this committee about whether this would open the door for bad actors in the education space to take advantage of these benefits.
- My staff, along with the staff of this Committee, have explored these concerns and have modifications to the language to ensure the bill does not have negative, unintended consequences, and it is my hope that the Committee will quickly consider this legislation so that veterans in Oklahoma can achieve career success after leaving the service.

- I deeply appreciate the attention the Committee has given to my bill, and I look forward to continuing my work with you to ensure this issue is addressed.
- While I am here, I would also like to address the Committee on some of the VA health clinic challenges we have had in Oklahoma.
- We have had serious problems at both VA centers in Oklahoma – Muskogee and Oklahoma City. It has only been with my office’s dedicated attention to these clinics that any measurable progress is being made.
- We have been helped by Ralph Gigliotti, our VISN director, who is outstanding. He has been very supportive of ensuring the changes that need to happen on the ground in Oklahoma actually take place. Both centers now have new directors because of his leadership.
- Recently, the VA contracted with the Joint Commission to do an investigation of Oklahoma’s facilities together with the Inspector General. Having this outside entity come in and compare the VA facilities with private sector health care facilities is helping identify clear problems for the local and regional directors to go after and fix. It is always nice to have a second opinion.
- One section of S. 2554 provides permanent authority for VISN directors like Ralph Gigliotti, to contract with outside entities to do these kinds of investigations. I believe this is an important authority that needs to be explicitly provided to them, so that more of the VA health center problems, which we hear about all over the place, can be fully addressed.
- Thank you again for having me today.