



Student Veterans of America
1625 K STREET NW, STE 320
WASHINGTON, DC 20006
www.studentveterans.org

**TESTIMONY OF
MR. D. WAYNE ROBINSON
PRESIDENT & CEO
STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA**

**BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. SENATE
LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON THE TOPIC OF:
"THE STATE OF VA HEALTH CARE"**

MAY 15, 2014



Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Burr and members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit our testimony on “The State of VA Health Care.” As the premier advocate for student veterans in higher education, it is our privilege to share our on-the-ground perspective with you today.

I’d like to begin by addressing the family members of the veterans for whom we are gathered today. We at Student Veterans of America honor the service of your loved ones and stand with you in seeking answers related to their deaths.

SVA is a network of over 1,000 chapters on as many campuses across all fifty states and three countries. These chapters are comprised of veterans from multiple eras of service, with the majority having served after 9/11. Our recently released *Million Records Project* showed that these student veterans are succeeding in higher education. Paramount to that success is the ability to remain healthy and utilize the healthcare system provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs. While our constituents may be younger, they also face very similar issues as the brave men and women who have come before.

Our Approach

As a former Command Sergeant Major in the Army with service spanning nearly three decades, and as the current leader of a large disparate organization, I understand how difficult it is to be responsible for many locations and workforces. I also understand the position of older and younger veterans, as I have served alongside, have led, and have been taught by both. Many of these friends and former leaders of mine ensure that I remain abreast of the issues they face while accessing care. Also in my travels, I speak to our chapter members who are seeking to raise their kids, attend classes, and deal with the effects of serving in a protracted war on two fronts. I am very familiar with the difficulties of developing strategy and tactics simultaneously, especially in a resource constrained environment. It is with this purview that I approach the current VA issues concerning healthcare and those deserving of it.

In this testimony, we touch on student-level issues of health and well-being with our main focus being on higher education, for that is our area of expertise. As the GI Bill makes up a major portion of the benefits administered by the VA, we believe it is essential to consider education and the role it plays in the life of veterans who may simultaneously be receiving healthcare.

Student veterans are as diverse as our nation, progressing towards degrees at varying stages of their lives. Likewise, our members have millions of experiences with the VA and other large institutions integral to their success on a daily basis. They rely on the VA every day for their livelihood, their healthcare, and the future success of themselves and their families. This support system for student veterans may be understood by looking at three levels of support, which we term the “three pillars”.



The Three Pillars of Student Veteran Well-Being

We encourage this committee to focus on the following Three Pillars of Student Veteran Well-Being individually as well as collectively:

- **Pillar 1—Institutions:** Institutional support for student veterans is an important aspect of maintaining a strong pipeline of successful veteran graduates. The ability of the VA to connect with and administer care at the university level – for both mental and physical health – is critical. The lack of coordination and communication at this level continues to be a major concern.
- **Pillar 2—Individuals:** Establishing an environment for the student veteran to fluidly interact with the institution and the community is a determining factor in whether or not they will achieve their goals, as those who do not feel welcome may not persist in their studies. Empowering on-campus health systems to meet the needs of student veterans can supplement VA services.
- **Pillar 3—Communities:** An established network across various university offices, academic networks, and career services enables the student veteran to make the transition from the campus to a fulfilling career. Another area of improvement would be to connect student veterans with the various veteran-related points of contact, such as the VA certifying official, the counseling center, and potentially the VetSuccess advisor. The VA could facilitate these connections by making it easier to contact these individuals through a transparent directory available to both university staff and student veterans.

Successes in Education

It is the firm belief of SVA that the VA has successfully overhauled the education benefits process, and that this same level of production should be sought within all components of the Department. Over the last five years, Sec. Shinseki led the VA as it brought GI Bill processing times down to just one week, and tripled the number of VetSuccess On Campus (VSOC) sites across the country. In that same time, the VA has paid out more than \$40 billion in tuition and benefits to nearly 1.2 million veterans, service members, and their families, since the Post-9/11 GI Bill went into effect on August 1, 2009.

With programs like VSOC, and support from postsecondary institutions signing onto the Principles of Excellence, veterans are operating in environments where they are prone to excel. The VA's VSOC is intended to, "help Veterans, Servicemembers, and their qualified dependents succeed and thrive through a coordinated delivery of on-campus benefits assistance and counseling, leading to completion of their education and preparing them to enter the labor market in viable careers." We see the VSOC program as a means to further enrich student veteran support across a variety of benefits to include healthcare.



The targeted expansion of this program to a current total of 94 schools continues to show positive outcomes, and we have heard overwhelmingly positive feedback from our members at the campuses where it is in place. We should note that we feel the program is difficult to bring to a university if they have a need or interest due to the selective criteria of having large veteran populations of 800+ and a 25-mile proximity to VA medical centers. As such, some schools in rural areas or with smaller yet just as deserving veteran populations may never be eligible for these services at the present requirements.

What Is Best for Student Veterans?

With the right tools and resources, SVA sees no limit to the potential of student veterans in higher education and beyond. When empowered and in the right environment, we know veterans lead productive and healthy lives. For student veterans, acting as leaders amongst our peers, balancing multiple competing priorities, and succeeding with limited resources are all natural challenges; indeed they are the very circumstances for which the Department of Defense has so effectively trained them. It is up to our schools, the VA, and the nation to ensure that those veterans are met half-way with the proper care and benefits that they have earned.

We recognize that the VA has a long way to go on some of its programs. It is our sincere hope that the Secretary is able to achieve the kind of outcomes across the Department that he has accomplished for student veterans with the implementation of its benefits programs. We urge the VA to nominate a candidate for the soon-to-be-vacant Under Secretary of Health position to replace the retiring Dr. Petzel as soon as possible for Senate consideration, so that new leadership can come to VHA to address this issue head on.

SVA believes that Sec. Shinseki is dedicated to America's veterans more than ever; it has been under his leadership that the VA has seen substantial improvements over the years. While the recent allegations are disturbing indeed, we would encourage the Secretary to take swift and decisive action when the full facts become clear. This action will demonstrate his commitment to student veterans who utilize the VA healthcare system, and to veterans everywhere.

We thank the Chairman, Ranking Member, and the committee members for your time, attention, and devotion to the cause of veterans in higher education. As always, we welcome your feedback and questions, and we look forward to continuing to work with this committee, and the Congress to ensure the success of all generations of veterans through education.