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Testimony of Tammy I. Barlet  
Vice President of Government Affairs  
Student Veterans of America (SVA)  
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Chairmen Moran and Bost, Ranking Members Blumenthal and Takano, and Members of Senate and House Committees on Veterans' Affairs,

Student Veterans of America (SVA) submits this testimony with deep respect for the responsibility these Committees carry and with equal respect for the students whose futures are shaped by the policies you steward, *to, through, and beyond higher education*.<sup>1</sup> Education remains one of the nation's most enduring covenants with those who serve and steady, structural guarantor of national security.<sup>2</sup> When it is designed with care and administered with fidelity, it becomes a durable engine of mobility, dignity, and continued civic contribution.

The student veteran population is changing in ways that demand attentiveness rather than nostalgia. Today's veterans arrive on campus older, frequently with families, often balancing employment and caregiving alongside coursework.<sup>3</sup> They pursue education across modalities that reflect necessity rather than preference. Policy that assumes a single, linear student experience no longer serves the population it intends to honor.

SVA's recommendations for 2026 are grounded in proximity to these realities. They reflect sustained engagement with student veterans on campuses across the country, rigorous research translated into practice, and an institutional memory informed by nearly two decades of advocacy. Our aim is straightforward and exacting: to align federal education benefits with the realities of veterans' lives and the trajectories they seek to build. We invite policymakers, educators, and partners across sectors to engage with these priorities as a matter of shared stewardship and enduring national interest.

## Introduction

Founded in 2008, Student Veterans of America (SVA) emerged from a grassroots coalition of GI Bill users whose education benefits no longer aligned with the realities of the higher education system they entered. These veterans organized around the shared concern that the promise of the GI Bill risked erosion without sustained advocacy to preserve the fidelity of its purpose. Their efforts helped shape and secure the Post-9/11 GI Bill, ensuring that education benefits reflected both the scale of modern service and the demands of contemporary education.

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<sup>1</sup> SVA's mission is to "act as a catalyst for student veteran success by providing resources, network support and advocacy to, through, and beyond higher education." SVA's vision is "empowering student veterans to lead and live their best lives." For more on the mission and vision of the organization, see <https://studentveterans.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> Eberstadt, N., & Abramsky, E. (2022). *The changing global distribution of highly educated manpower, 1950–2040: Findings and implications*. American Enterprise Institute. <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/the-changing-global-distribution-of-highly-educated-manpower-1950-2040-findings-and-implications/>

<sup>3</sup> Student Veterans of America. (2023). *SVA Census*. <https://studentveterans.org/research/sva-census/>

That momentum did not end with legislative success. As veterans carried these benefits onto campuses and into classrooms, they became instruments of economic mobility and professional reinvention. They entered higher education with earned capability and clear intent, even as many institutions struggled to keep pace with their transition. The organization today was born from this, as SVA evolved into a national organization dedicated to advancing veteran success through policy, research, and campus-based leadership.

Today, SVA's system of record lists more than 1,600 chapters at colleges and universities in the United States and abroad. These chapters are the backbone of the student veteran ecosystem. They serve as hubs of peer support, leadership development, and institutional engagement, often acting as the first point of contact for veterans navigating enrollment, benefits, academic challenges, and transition stress. On many campuses, SVA chapters function as informal advising networks, referral points for basic needs support, and trusted partners to campus leadership. An estimated 840,000 students currently use GI Bill benefits,<sup>4</sup> and nearly 600,000 of them attend institutions with an SVA chapter.<sup>5</sup> Through this network, SVA helps veterans navigate higher education while fostering belonging, purpose, and persistence.

### **Saddleback College Student Veteran Club**

At Saddleback College in Mission Viejo, California, the *Saddleback College Student Veterans Club* has become a connective presence within campus life, linking the experiences of military-affiliated students to the broader academic community through sustained engagement, collaboration, and service. The chapter operates as a bridge, translating veteran experience into shared civic understanding while strengthening inclusion across student, faculty, and administrative spaces.

One of the chapter's most consequential contributions has been the establishment of a Senator for Veteran Students within the Associated Student Government. This role institutionalized veteran representation in campus governance and improved coordination among the VETS Center, Counseling Services, and student leadership. The result has been clearer communication, greater visibility, and a more consistent understanding of veteran needs across the college.

The chapter also integrates veteran perspectives into the cultural and social life of the institution. Through joint programming with other student organizations and campus departments, including forums centered on women veterans, family-oriented events, and college-wide galas, the chapter creates spaces where the veteran experience is both recognized and shared. These efforts invite engagement from non-military students and reinforce veterans as contributors to the intellectual and civic fabric of the campus.

Beyond the college, the chapter sustains partnerships with local organizations that reflect a continued commitment to service. Members participate in environmental stewardship through coastal cleanups, coordinate food deliveries for families in need, and engage with veteran service organizations across Orange County. These activities extend the chapter's presence beyond campus while reinforcing intergenerational ties within the veteran community.

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<sup>4</sup> According to the VBA Annual Benefits Report Fiscal Year 2023, updated February 2024, there were 843,135 recipients combined of the Post-9/11 GI Bill (chapter 33), MGIB-AD (chapter 30), MGIB-SR (1606), DEA (chapter 35), and VEAP (chapter 32).

<sup>5</sup> The number of those receiving GI Bill benefits reported by campus in the VA's GI Bill Comparison Tool dataset were cross-referenced with campuses present in the SVA system of record as having an SVA chapter.



Through this work, the Saddleback College Student Veterans Club demonstrates how chapters function as institutional assets. By embedding the veteran voice in governance, student life, and community engagement, the chapter strengthens the campus as a whole while advancing belonging, visibility, and shared responsibility.

### **The Student Veterans Association at The Ohio State University**

The Student Veterans Association at The Ohio State University chapter operates as an anchor for student veterans and military-connected students, supporting academic persistence, professional development, and civic engagement through sustained collaboration and leadership. Working in close partnership with Ohio State's Military and Veteran Services, campus offices, and student organizations, the chapter helps student veterans and their families access resources, build durable connections, and navigate higher education with confidence.

The chapter places particular emphasis on career readiness and leadership development by bringing high-impact opportunities directly to campus. Through convenings that have included Hiring Our Heroes, SVA national leadership, and the President of The Ohio State University, the chapter has strengthened pathways linking military service, education, and employment. This work is reinforced by a strong internal leadership pipeline. Current and former officers participate in the SVA Leadership Institute, including the chapter's Media Secretary and President, and senior student leaders continue to contribute as mentors, sustaining continuity and institutional knowledge.

Beyond the university, the chapter maintains active relationships with state and community partners to expand support networks for military-connected students. The chapter's annual 9/11 Stair Climb, which has included participation by the Ohio Secretary of State, integrates remembrance with civic engagement and public service. Chapter leaders have also worked to elevate access to mental health resources and visibility for student veterans, including support for campus-wide initiatives focused on wellness and connection.

Through participation in SVA regional programming and the hosting of mentorship-centered professional development events, including engagements with private-sector partners, the Ohio State chapter demonstrates how campus-based leadership can extend outward, strengthening both institutional capacity and community trust. In doing so, the chapter reflects the broader role SVA chapters play in translating veteran experience into academic, professional, and civic contribution.

### **Nikki Gold, U.S. Navy Veteran, Oregon State University**

At Oregon State University, Nikki Gold serves in multiple leadership roles that shape academic governance and veteran representation. A U.S. Navy veteran, SVA Leadership Fellow, and public health science student, Nikki serves as President of the Student Veterans Association, LGBTQ+ Veteran Coordinator at the Holcomb Center, and Undergraduate Trustee for the university. Through these roles, they contribute directly to shaping policy, representation, and belonging for military-connected students across campus and throughout the state of Oregon.

Nikki's path to higher education followed active-duty service as a surface sonar technician aboard guided-missile destroyers in San Diego and Hawai'i, where they advanced to the rank of Petty Officer Second Class. In the Navy, Nikki developed a leadership style grounded in responsibility, collaboration, and care for diverse teams. Those same qualities now inform their work in higher education, where leadership is exercised through institution-building rather than command.

At Oregon State, Nikki has strengthened the visibility and influence of student veterans by linking campus initiatives with statewide partners and public agencies. They co-founded Those Who Serve in collaboration with Counseling and Psychological Services, creating a structured peer support space for LGBTQ+ veterans and currently serving

members. This work reflects a broader commitment to ensuring that institutional systems recognize the full range of veteran experiences and identities.

Looking forward, Nikki plans to pursue legal education as a continuation of public service. Their aim is to integrate public health, policy, and law in pursuit of systemic change that expands access, strengthens representation, and advances opportunity for veterans and other historically underrepresented communities.

### **Gregory Hillman, U.S. Marine Corps Veteran, University of Nevada, Reno**

Gregory Hillman's work reflects a sustained commitment to individual growth, community restoration, and service grounded in lived experience. An United States Marine Corps veteran with eleven years of service, including five years as an Explosive Ordnance Disposal technician, Greg served in high-risk operational environments that demanded technical precision, sound judgment, and resilience under pressure. His military service, followed by international contracting work, shaped a deep understanding of trauma, responsibility, and the enduring effects of service across the life course.

Following his transition from active service, Greg pursued higher education and service-oriented work with intention. He reframed experience into practice, focusing on healing, learning, and community contribution. He earned an associate degree in theatre, psychology, and social work and is currently completing a bachelor's degree in social work, with plans to pursue graduate study at the University of Nevada, Reno. His academic path reflects a commitment to translating experience into professional capacity.

At Truckee Meadows Community College, Greg serves as a Peer Academic Advisor, supporting students as they navigate higher education, integration, and personal development. His work is particularly impactful for military-connected students, for whom he provides guidance rooted in shared experience and informed by professional training. In this role, Greg contributes directly to retention, belonging, and academic persistence.

Beyond campus, Greg serves as Mentor Coordinator at Court Assistance Military Offenders (CAMO) Court in Reno, Nevada, where he supports justice-involved veterans through structured mentorship and accountability-based community engagement. He also volunteers as a guitar instructor with CreatiVets, using music as a connective and therapeutic practice that fosters expression, trust, and recovery. At the University of Nevada, Greg remains active in student leadership and advocacy through organizations including Wolfpack Vets and the Undergraduate Students of Social Work Association. Across these roles, Greg approaches leadership as relational rather than positional. Guided by empathy, curiosity, and a belief in human potential, he works to help others recover dignity, recognize possibility, and pursue purpose, even in the aftermath of hardship.



SVA understands its responsibility to be one of stewardship and accountability, guided by the chapters and the students whose leadership gives the organization its mandate. At our national headquarters in Washington, D.C., the organization's mission remains to ensure that student veterans are equipped to succeed in higher education and to translate that success into durable economic and civic outcomes. This work is anchored in the understanding that transition is a sequence of choices shaped by access to timely information, credible guidance, and sustained support.

SVA works to ensure that transitioning service members and their families are prepared to make informed decisions about education and economic futures. Through national initiatives such as the SVA Success Hub and the SVA Advising Center, veterans receive structured guidance that helps them navigate benefits, select programs aligned with career goals, and anticipate the financial and professional implications of those choices.

At the campus level, SVA invests directly in chapter capacity. Leadership development, national and regional programming, and ongoing chapter services strengthen local ecosystems of support and ensure that student veterans are not navigating higher education in isolation. These efforts recognize chapters as essential partners in retention, belonging, and institutional engagement.

SVA also advances veteran well-being by supporting access to mental health care during and after transition. Through collaborative efforts such as the Veteran Wellness Alliance<sup>6</sup> and partnerships with the Department of Veterans Affairs, SVA helps reduce barriers to care and promotes continuity between campus-based support and federal services. Through sustained campus visits and direct engagement with institutional leadership, SVA works to ensure that student veterans can access guidance and services responsive to varied backgrounds, identities, and life circumstances. This engagement reinforces accountability while strengthening institutional understanding of veteran experiences.

Finally, SVA builds and maintains strong connections with employers across the private, public, and nonprofit sectors. Through a networked approach and the SVA Career Center, the organization supports career readiness, facilitates meaningful employment pathways, and reinforces education as a bridge between military service and long-term professional contribution.

SVA's work operates across multiple levels. At the campus level, chapters build community, identify unmet needs, and connect students to resources. Chapter leaders regularly surface barriers related to housing insecurity, food access, childcare, mental health, and benefits administration long before those challenges appear in national data. At the national level, SVA aggregates these lived experiences through research, convenes cross-sector partners, and advocates for policy reforms that align education benefits with contemporary realities. This testimony reflects that integrated approach.

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<sup>6</sup> The Veteran Wellness Alliance (VWA) is a coalition of veteran peer-to-peer networks and top mental and brain health care providers, connecting veterans, service members, and their families to high-quality care for invisible wounds. For more information, see <https://www.bushcenter.org/topics/veterans/veteran-transition/veteran-wellness-alliance>

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## The GI Bill is the Front Door to VA

Measured not only by its scale but by its consequences, the Post-9/11 GI Bill has become one of the most consequential federal interventions shaping veterans' economic trajectories in the twenty-first century. Longitudinal analyses of federal education and earnings data demonstrate that veterans who use GI Bill benefits enroll in postsecondary education at high rates and complete credentials at levels that compare favorably with, and in many cases exceed, those of similarly situated civilian learners.<sup>7</sup> Among enlisted veterans eligible for the benefit between 2009 and 2019, more than 54 percent made use of GI Bill education benefits, with participation rising to approximately 62 percent when transferred entitlements to spouses and dependents are included.<sup>8</sup> These outcomes are associated with measurable earnings gains and improved long-term labor market attachment, reinforcing the GI Bill's role as a primary engine of post-service economic mobility.<sup>9</sup>

Yet the GI Bill's significance extends beyond education alone. For many veterans, engaging the benefit constitutes their earliest sustained interaction with the federal systems designed to support them after service. That experience quietly shapes how veterans understand the obligations to them and their own willingness to seek assistance in the future. When education benefits function predictably, transparently, and without friction, they establish a foundation of institutional trust.<sup>10</sup> When they do not, disengagement follows, often long before veterans learn to dial 1-800-MyVA411.

Over the past decade, the administration of the GI Bill has undergone meaningful transformation. Investments in information technology modernization, automation of benefit processing, and customer service reform within the Veterans Benefits Administration have reduced delays and improved reliability.<sup>11</sup> These improvements are significant precisely because they reduce visibility in that education benefits are most effective when they recede into dependability rather than demand constant management by the beneficiary. Such gains, however, are not self-sustaining. They require continued oversight to ensure that modernization efforts remain responsive to veteran experience rather than driven solely by system efficiency.

Structural misalignment across federal agencies continues to complicate an otherwise successful program. Veterans routinely navigate overlapping jurisdictions among the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Education, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Labor, each operating with distinct definitions, timelines, and data systems. Research consistently identifies fragmented governance and inconsistent advising as contributors to

<sup>7</sup> This is shown in reports such as (1) Barr, A., Chen, S., & Eberly, J. (2023). *The Post-9/11 GI Bill: Impacts on enrollment, attainment, and earnings*. Referenced in Inside Higher Ed coverage:

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/student-aid-policy/2024/02/16/new-depth-report-highlights-outcomes-post-911-gi-bill>; and (2) Cate, C. A., Lyon, J. S., Schmeling, J., & Bogue, B. Y. (2017). *National Veteran Education Success Tracker: A report on the academic success of student veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill*. Student Veterans of America. [https://studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/NVEST-Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/NVEST-Report_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Radford, A. W. (2024). First look at Post-9/11 GI Bill outcomes for enlisted veterans (Working Paper). American Institutes for Research. <https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/First-Look-Post-9-11-GI-Bill-Outcomes-Enlisted-Veterans-February-2024.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Barr, A., Chen, S., & Eberly, J. (2023). *The Post-9/11 GI Bill: Impacts on enrollment, attainment, and earnings*. Referenced in Inside Higher Ed coverage: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/student-aid-policy/2024/02/16/new-depth-report-highlights-outcomes-post-911-gi-bill>

<sup>10</sup> In 2025, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) experienced a significant increase in veteran trust, reaching over 80%, up from 55% in 2016. This rise in confidence coincides with the "Digital GI Bill" modernization, which has improved claims processing. See more at <https://news.va.gov/press-room/veteran-trust-va-increased-25-since-2016-high/>

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. (n.d.). *Transforming the GI Bill experience*. Digital VA. Retrieved February 19, 2025, from <https://digital.va.gov/delightful-end-user-experience/transforming-the-gi-bill-experience/>

delayed enrollment, confusion over eligibility, and suboptimal program choice.<sup>12</sup> As postsecondary education increasingly includes apprenticeships, short-term credentials, workforce-aligned certificates, and online or hybrid instruction, the costs of this misalignment grow more pronounced. Institutional context further shapes outcomes. Veterans who enroll in higher-quality public and nonprofit institutions demonstrate stronger completion rates and more favorable earnings trajectories than peers attending lower-performing institutions, underscoring the importance of transparent information and informed choice for GI Bill users.<sup>13</sup> The benefit's promise is realized most fully when veterans are supported in navigating institutional quality rather than left to interpret opaque systems alone.

Looking forward, the durability of the GI Bill will depend on its capacity to adapt without losing coherence. Continued investment in digital benefits navigation, including mobile-first platforms, real-time decision support, and carefully governed AI-enabled customer service tools, offers a path toward reducing administrative burden while expanding equitable access for veterans balancing employment, caregiving, disability, or geographic isolation. These tools must support human judgment and interagency accountability rather than supplant them.

SVA recognizes the progress achieved through recent reforms and commends the Department of Veterans Affairs for elevating education benefits as a core operational priority. We will continue to advocate that sustaining that progress will require renewed attention to interagency coordination, data-sharing, disciplined oversight of modernization efforts, and deliberate removal of barriers that disproportionately affect rural, disabled, and non-traditional learners. Treated as a living system rather than a static entitlement, the GI Bill can continue to serve as a foundation for individual advancement and national capacity alike.

### **VA Claims One-on-One Support (“The SVA NatCon-VA Claims Clinic”)**

At SVA's 18th Annual National Conference (“NatCon” in January of 2026), the sustained partnership between SVA and the VA entered its fourth year occupying a growing portion of the exhibitor hall (the “SVA Campus”), with over 200 VA representatives assisting student veterans with benefits counseling, mental health enrollment, and disability claims support. In two days and under four inches of snow, these VA representatives provided one-on-one assistance to 414 veterans, scheduled 201 compensation and pension exams, completed 23 disability ratings on site, and processed an additional 706 disability benefits questionnaires for claims.<sup>14</sup> What was most remarkable was the impact this event had on the eight individuals who filed their claims, received an examination, and received a claims decision in under 96 hours. These interactions are a blueprint of what VA engagement should look like nationwide—proactive, veteran-centric, and focused on delivering real results.



Looking ahead, SVA remains resolute in its responsibility to safeguard the GI Bill as a lifelong instrument of veteran mobility and empowerment. Modern infrastructure, genuine accessibility, and rigorous interagency coordination are prerequisites for a system worthy of those it serves. The GI Bill embodies a national obligation. In this session of Congress, honoring that obligation requires deliberate action to ensure the promise of education is realized for every veteran, in practice as well as in principle.

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<sup>12</sup> Abbey, D. M. (2022). How veterans make meaning of the college choice process in the Post-9/11 era. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, 13(4). <https://jces.ua.edu/articles/63/files/62e2abdce93bb.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Kelchen, R., & Goldrick-Rab, S. (2023). Recent data show minimal change in veterans' enrollment patterns. Ithaca S+R. <https://sr.ithaca.org/blog/recent-data-show-minimal-change-in-veterans-enrollment-patterns/>

<sup>14</sup> This data was provided by the VBA Office of Colorado Springs, Denver Regional Office, who served during the 18<sup>th</sup> Annual SVA National Conference in Colorado Springs, CO, January 8-10, 2026.

## SVA Research Findings and Initiatives

SVA’s annual Census provides further insights into the unique demographics of student veterans.<sup>15</sup> Over 85 percent of GI Bill users are prior enlisted, while the remaining 14 percent are former warrant or commissioned officers. The vast majority (about 93 percent) are over the age of 25, with the largest portion between 25 and 35. Over half are married, and more than half have children, with around 20 percent being single parents. Nearly 75 percent of student veterans work while in school, with financial pressures varying significantly by race, ethnicity, and gender seeing 99 percent of student veterans who are Black women working while in school.

When it comes to school and degree choice, student veterans overwhelmingly attend public or nonprofit institutions.<sup>16</sup> Most are using their GI Bill to earn bachelor’s degrees first, followed by master’s degrees, associate degrees, and terminal degrees such as PhDs, JDs, and MDs. Importantly, student veterans outperform the national average in academic success—with an average GPA of 3.35 compared to the national average of 3.15.<sup>17</sup> The success rate for student veterans, measured as an aggregate of graduation, persistence, retention, and transfer-up, stands at 72 percent,<sup>18</sup> exceeding the national average of 66 percent.<sup>19</sup>

SVA approaches research as an act of stewardship, oriented toward what is possible rather than what has already occurred. The question before us is not whether veterans can succeed in higher education and the workforce. The evidence is unequivocal that they do.<sup>20</sup> The more compelling question is how much more they could achieve if the barriers they navigate were removed and their momentum fully supported.

Across recent analyses, one pattern remains consistent. Veterans who complete postsecondary credentials experience strong labor market outcomes.<sup>21</sup> Veterans with bachelor’s degrees earn substantially more over their lifetimes than their civilian peers, and those with graduate and professional degrees see even greater earnings advantages.<sup>22</sup> Yet these gains coexist with forms of economic stifling that are less visible in annual income data. Delayed entry into the

<sup>15</sup> Student Veterans of America. (2023). *SVA Census*. <https://studentveterans.org/research/sva-census/>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Westrick, P. A., Angehr, E. L., Shaw, E. J., & Marini, J. P. (2024, July). *Recent trends in college readiness and subsequent college performance: With faculty perspectives on student readiness*. College Board. <https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/Recent-Trends-in-College-Readiness-and-Subsequent-College-Performance.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Cate, C. A., Lyon, J. S., Schmeling, J., & Bogue, B. Y. (2017). *National Veteran Education Success Tracker: A report on the academic success of student veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill*. Student Veterans of America. [https://studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/NVEST-Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/NVEST-Report_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Success rate in NVEST was calculated as a non-attrition rate, so for civilian students, the corollary was used. See Education Data Initiative. (n.d.). *College dropout rates*. <https://educationdata.org/college-dropout-rates>

<sup>20</sup> Cate, C. A., Lyon, J. S., Schmeling, J., & Bogue, B. Y. (2017). *National Veteran Education Success Tracker: A report on the academic success of student veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill*. Student Veterans of America. [https://studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/NVEST-Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/NVEST-Report_FINAL.pdf). Of note in this work, SVA has used “success rate” as compared to “graduation rate” because the standard metric of a cohorted four-, six-, or eight-year graduation rate is inappropriate for student veterans (and nontraditional students, writ large) because of the non-linear path these students take from high school and through higher education before starting a career. Success rate is a non-attrition rate that combines graduation, persistence, transfer, and retention. Compared to traditional students, the success rate of student veterans is significantly higher. When cohorted graduation rates are used, often military service or family or work obligations prevent student veterans from remaining in the same cohort, thus diminishing their presence in these metrics.

<sup>21</sup> A veteran with a bachelor’s degree earns an average of \$84,255 annually, compared to \$67,232 for civilians. At the advanced degree level, veterans earn \$129,082 annually, significantly higher than the \$99,734 average for civilians. See more at D’Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families. (2019). *Student veterans: A valuable asset to higher education*. Syracuse University. [https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Student-Vets\\_Valuable-AssetFINAL-11.6.19.pdf](https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Student-Vets_Valuable-AssetFINAL-11.6.19.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

civilian workforce, mis-aligned career opportunities, interruptions in career progression, and constrained access to professional networks translate into slower wealth accumulation and postponed financial security.<sup>23</sup> Earnings alone do not capture the full cost of service on economic mobility.

It is within this tension between measurable success and structural drag that SVA has focused its most recent research agenda. Economic mobility and career advancement sit at the center of this work. Through partnerships with employers, workforce intermediaries, and technology leaders, SVA has worked to document the pathways by which veterans translate education into meaningful careers. Our recent collaboration with Google examined career trajectories from military service through education and into the workforce in an *11-state Student Veteran Policy Landscape*. In doing so, it traced how credentials, digital skills, and employer signaling shape veteran hiring and advancement, surfacing both opportunity and friction in sectors that prize adaptability and leadership yet often misread military experience. These findings have informed employer engagement strategies, career navigation tools, and policy conversations about aligning education benefits with labor market demand<sup>24</sup> both at the national and state levels.

Continuing at the state level, SVA is in its second year adapting its *National Veteran Education Success Tracker (NVEST)* project.<sup>25</sup> Generosity from the Greater Texas Foundation and a partnership with the Texas A&M University System, supported by a consortium of Texas state agencies and other higher education institutions, has allowed SVA to create *NVEST in Texas*, which represents a new phase in evidence building. By institutionalizing a state-based approach to understanding student veterans, this project is moving beyond national averages to capture variation across institutions, regions, and systems. *NVEST in Texas* is allowing policymakers and educators to see where veterans are succeeding, where they are stalling, and where interventions can be targeted with precision. It is a model for how states can move from anecdote to infrastructure in supporting veteran education and workforce outcomes.

Underlying this work is a recognition that timely, high-quality data is itself a form of access. Veterans are often rendered visible to institutions only after challenges surface or benefits registered, but we know that not all veterans on campus are seen. The annual *SVA Census*<sup>26</sup> and the ongoing *LifeCycle Atlas*<sup>27</sup> are designed to change that temporal lag. Together, they map how veterans move across education, work, and community over time, capturing nonlinear pathways that defy traditional student classifications. These tools surface who veterans are, when they enroll, how

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<sup>23</sup> On average, a delay in workforce entry without the advancement that should come with the skills acquired in the military and credentials of a college degree stifles the accumulation of wealth through compounding interest of investments in retirement, for example. See other examples at Goger, A., & Alvero, A. (2023, November 9). *Veteran poverty, by the numbers*. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/veteran-poverty-by-the-numbers/>.

<sup>24</sup> Google's investment in veteran career pathway research allowed Student Veterans of America to examine how veterans move from military service into education and ultimately into the workforce. The collaboration identified how credentials, digital skills, and employer signaling shape hiring, early career placement, and advancement opportunities for veterans, highlighting both points of alignment and persistent disconnects between military experience and civilian talent pipelines. These findings are informing employer-facing practices, career navigation guidance for student veterans, and policy recommendations aimed at improving access to high-demand fields and accelerating long-term career progression, including recommendation in credit for prior learning and needs insecurities mitigation.

<sup>25</sup> Cate, C. A., Lyon, J. S., Schmeling, J., & Bogue, B. Y. (2017). *National Veteran Education Success Tracker: A report on the academic success of student veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill*. Student Veterans of America. [https://studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/NVEST-Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/NVEST-Report_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Student Veterans of America. (2023). *SVA Census*. <https://studentveterans.org/research/sva-census/>

<sup>27</sup> Kinch, A. K., & Cate, C. A. (ongoing). *Life Cycle Atlas*. Student Veterans of America. <https://studentveterans.org/research/life-cycle-atlas/>

they balance work and family, and where institutional systems succeed or fail to meet them. Earlier access to this data enables earlier intervention, shifting policy from reactive accommodation to anticipatory support.

Economic mobility, however, cannot be disentangled from basic security. SVA's current *Basic Needs and Wellbeing Study*,<sup>28</sup> conducted in partnership with the Institute for Veterans and Military Families, examines the material and social conditions that shape veterans' capacity to persist in education and training during the first year after separation. Food and housing insecurity, financial precarity, caregiving responsibilities, and gaps in healthcare access exert quiet but cumulative pressure on academic and career decision-making. These pressures are compounded by less visible forms of insecurity, including social isolation and disrupted identity during transition.

To capture these dynamics, SVA has advanced a broader understanding of what enables stability. Through the development of *11-state State Student Veteran Policy Landscape* project and the *LifeCycle Atlas* as well complementary measures of social transition wealth, our research recognizes that belonging, trust, and community connection function as stabilizing forces during periods of disruption. SVA chapters repeatedly emerge as critical sites where these forms of support are generated, mitigating risk during moments when veterans are most vulnerable to disengagement. Taken together, this body of work points toward a simple conclusion with complex implications: Veteran success is neither accidental nor automatic but rather is produced at the intersection of economic opportunity, institutional knowledge, and basic security. Data allows us to see where that intersection holds and where it fractures. Policy determines whether those fractures widen or are repaired.

As Congress considers the future of veteran education and workforce policy, SVA urges a sustained commitment to evidence that is timely, disaggregated, and grounded in lived experience. Taken together, SVA's research presents a consistent and forward-looking picture of today's student veterans. They are enrolling in higher education with clear economic intent, persisting at high rates despite competing responsibilities, and translating education into meaningful work and long-term contribution. These outcomes are not accidental. They emerge from a combination of individual capability and the presence, or absence, of institutional supports at critical moments of transition.

What the data also makes clear is that veteran success is cumulative. Economic mobility is shaped early, while veterans are still enrolled and preparing for careers. Persistence depends on whether institutions can identify and support veterans before disruption occurs. Progress is sustained only when basic stability is preserved from the point of separation through workforce entry. Each of these elements reinforces the others. When one is missing, momentum slows. When they align, opportunity compounds.

This understanding informs SVA's approach to policy. Rather than treating education benefits, workforce programs, and student supports as separate interventions, SVA's legislative priorities for 2026 reflect how veterans actually move from service into civilian life. They are designed to strengthen the pathway from education to employment, improve visibility and coordination across systems, and ensure stability during the transition period when veterans are most vulnerable to disruption.

It is from this evidence base that SVA advances a coherent legislative theory of change. What follows outlines how these principles translate into specific policy priorities and why advancing them together is essential to realizing the full potential of veteran education as a driver of economic mobility.

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<sup>28</sup> Student Veterans of America. (n.d.). *Student veterans' basic needs and wellness survey*.  
<https://studentveterans.org/research/student-veterans-basic-needs-and-wellness-survey/>

## A Legislative Theory of Change for Veteran Education and Workforce Policy

The research is unequivocal. Today's student veterans are succeeding in higher education and the workforce at scale, often while navigating obligations that would derail more traditional pathways. They are older, more likely to be supporting families, more likely to be working while enrolled, and more likely to pursue education with a clear eye toward economic mobility. These patterns are the context in which veteran education policy must operate.

SVA's current legislative priorities are grounded in this evidence. They reflect what chapters report from campuses, what longitudinal data reveals across systems, and what veterans themselves articulate through their choices. Taken together, these priorities advance a coherent theory of change: education serves as the primary engine of post-service mobility; data visibility determines whether that engine runs efficiently; and stability during transition determines whether momentum is sustained long enough to reach career placement. This framework is drawn directly from how veterans move through education and into work today.

SVA is putting forth the following **key policy priorities** that require immediate congressional action. These are briefly outlined below and are discussed in full in the following sections.

1. First, higher education must function as a **genuine pathway to workforce integration and economic mobility**. Veterans pursue education with the expectation that it will lead to meaningful employment, professional advancement, and long-term stability. Policies must therefore strengthen the connection between learning and work, ensuring that education accelerates, rather than delays, entry into the civilian labor market.
2. Second, systems must be able to **see and support veterans early** in their transition. Data visibility determines whether institutions can guide veterans proactively or are forced to respond after challenges emerge. Without timely insight into who student veterans are and where they are in their educational and career trajectories, even well-intentioned supports arrive too late to be fully effective.
3. Finally, progress depends on **stability during the transition period** itself. From the moment of separation through career placement, veterans are balancing education with housing, income, family responsibilities, and health. Stability during this window is not incidental. It is the condition that allows persistence, planning, and momentum to be sustained.

Together, these principles form the foundation of SVA's legislative priorities for 2026. What follows is a coordinated strategy designed to align education benefits, data systems, and transitional supports with how veterans actually move from service into civilian life.

### Workforce Integration and Economic Mobility

Veterans overwhelmingly pursue higher education following military service because it remains the most reliable pathway into meaningful civilian careers. This choice reflects a rational economic calculation rather than a cultural expectation. Recent national analyses show that more than half of eligible enlisted veterans use their Post-9/11 GI

Bill benefits,<sup>29</sup> and those who complete degrees experience strong earnings outcomes over time.<sup>30</sup> The GI Bill is, by design, a generous and effective benefit. It succeeds in opening the door to education.

Yet generosity alone does not guarantee full economic return. Despite higher rates of degree completion and, eventually, higher earnings, veterans continue to experience delayed career progression and slower wealth accumulation relative to their civilian peers. Research indicates that even when veterans earn more annually after degree completion, they often require additional years in the workforce to close lifetime wealth gaps created by delayed entry, interrupted career trajectories, and reduced early access to professional networks. In effect, service confers skills and leadership capacity, but systemic gaps slow the translation of those assets into civilian economic advantage.

What is happening is not a failure of veterans to understand how to leverage internships or of education to correctly map military training to learning outcomes, but a misalignment of systems. Credentials matter, but credentials alone are insufficient. Veterans must also acquire civilian work experience while enrolled, translate military skills into employer-recognized signals, and remain financially solvent as they do so. National surveys and labor market analyses consistently show that veterans are less likely to participate in internships and early career experiential learning, not due to lack of interest, but because unpaid or low-paid opportunities are financially infeasible for students supporting families.<sup>31</sup> When these elements are misaligned, education becomes a slower and more precarious route to mobility than it should be.

In parallel with its policy and research efforts, SVA has invested in the responsible use of technology to narrow the distance between education and opportunity. Through the SVA Success Hub,<sup>32</sup> SVA has begun deploying AI-enabled systems that help student veterans translate their experiences, credentials, and academic pathways into clearer connections with internships, employment opportunities, campus resources, and support services. These tools are designed to reduce friction rather than replace human judgment, guiding veterans toward relevant opportunities more quickly while accounting for the realities of work schedules, family responsibilities, and geographic constraints. As these alignment systems mature, they increasingly function as connective tissue between education, workforce preparation, and support services, ensuring that veterans are not left to navigate complex ecosystems alone. This work reflects a broader recognition that access to opportunity is shaped by how effectively information, guidance, and pathways are integrated in real time. There is work to still be done, however, in extant policy opportunities to bridge gaps.

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<sup>29</sup> See Radford, A. W. (2024). *First look at Post-9/11 GI Bill outcomes for enlisted veterans*. American Institutes for Research and Cate, C. A., Lyon, J. S., Schmeling, J., & Bogue, B. Y. (2017). *National Veteran Education Success Tracker: A report on the academic success of student veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill*. Student Veterans of America. [https://studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/NVEST-Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/NVEST-Report_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>30</sup> *Student veterans: A valuable asset to higher education*. Syracuse University. [https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Student-Vets\\_Valuable-AssetFINAL-11.6.19.pdf](https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Student-Vets_Valuable-AssetFINAL-11.6.19.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> See Kinch, A. K., & Cate, C. A. (ongoing). *Life Cycle Atlas*. Student Veterans of America. <https://studentveterans.org/research/life-cycle-atlas> and Radford, A. W. (2024). *First look at Post-9/11 GI Bill outcomes for enlisted veterans*. American Institutes for Research

<sup>32</sup> Student Veterans of America has developed the SVA Success Hub as a centralized platform that integrates advising, career navigation, and resource referral for student veterans. The platform incorporates AI-enabled tools to assist veterans in identifying relevant academic, employment, and support opportunities based on individual goals, credentials, and constraints. These tools are designed to support decision-making rather than automate outcomes, with governance principles emphasizing transparency, data minimization, privacy protection, and human oversight. The Success Hub is intended to complement, not replace, campus-based advising and paid experiential learning programs by improving alignment between veterans and available opportunities in real time.

Modernizing VA Work-Study through H.R. 5965 and H.R. 6011 directly addresses this structural gap. These bills recognize that paid, relevant work during education is not ancillary to learning but integral to career formation. By increasing compensation, expanding eligibility, modernizing administrative processes, and aligning work-study roles with high-demand fields, these reforms allow veterans to earn income while building professional capital. This reduces the opportunity cost of education and accelerates entry into the workforce.

Similarly, updating the Post-9/11 GI Bill book and supply stipend through H.R. 1965 reflects the realities of contemporary education and employment. For the past almost 17 years, the stipend has remained unchanged from \$1000 per year. As highlighted in Student Veterans of America's Comprehensive Analysis of Student Veteran Book Stipend Survey, the average student veteran spent \$947.13 on books and materials in Fall 2023 alone, and \$748.29 in Spring 2024, meaning many exceeded their allotted stipend in a single semester. Further, STEM students, juniors, and those in certain geographic regions incur even greater costs, with some students reporting annual book and supply expenses exceeding \$7,500. Coursework in technical, scientific, and professional fields increasingly requires specialized software, equipment, licensing materials, and reliable digital access. When veterans cannot afford required materials, their preparation for the workforce is compromised long before graduation. Modernizing supply benefits ensures that veterans are equipped to succeed in programs that lead directly to employment and advancement.

These policies are necessary because economic mobility does not begin at commencement. It is shaped by the conditions under which veterans learn, work, and prepare for careers simultaneously. The evidence is clear that veterans are already using education strategically to advance into stable, well-aligned careers. The opportunity before policymakers is to ensure that military service enhances, rather than constrains, the economic potential that education is designed to unlock.

## **Data Visibility for Transitioning Servicemembers**

One of the most persistent structural challenges in serving student veterans is that institutions often do not know who student veterans are. Outside of self-identification—use of veteran resources or a veteran center—or the use of education benefits, campuses have limited means of identifying veterans within their student populations. As a result, veterans frequently move through higher education unseen until disruption occurs. When institutions lack visibility, they cannot align advising, financial support, career preparation, or basic needs resources in a timely manner. The cost of this invisibility comes as delayed intervention, missed opportunities for workforce preparation, and preventable attrition among students who have already demonstrated resilience and capability.

Improving data availability is therefore foundational. Earlier insight into who student veterans are, when they arrive, and how they are progressing enables institutions to shift from reactive response to intentional guidance. Visibility allows campuses to anticipate common pressure points, coordinate services before challenges compound, and connect veterans to academic and career pathways that reflect their goals. Without it, even well-designed programs operate too late to fully realize their impact.

Federal investment in centers dedicated to serving student veterans emerged as one of the earliest efforts to address this gap. Previous grant programs enabled campuses to establish veteran and military-connected student centers that functioned as visible, trusted points of coordination. Many student veterans, members of our own SVA chapters, were afforded physical space, staffing support, or programmatic authority through these investments. Where such

centers existed, chapters consistently reported similar outcomes: stronger persistence, deeper campus belonging, clearer pathways to employment, and the formation of durable professional and peer networks.

These centers created visibility through relationship and proximity. Staff and chapter leaders developed a working knowledge of who their veterans were, when they arrived, and where challenges commonly surfaced. That relational insight allowed campuses to align academic advising with career planning, facilitate introductions to internships and campus employment, and help veterans translate military experience into civilian professional identity. In practice, SVA chapters reported that access to these spaces strengthened workforce readiness by embedding veterans within networks that extended beyond the classroom and into professional communities.

However, these successes were uneven and often fragile. The presence, capacity, and authority of veteran centers varied widely across institutions, frequently dependent on short-term funding cycles or individual champions. Data remained localized, coordination inconsistent, and outcomes difficult to sustain or scale. While SVA chapters demonstrated what was possible, the absence of formal infrastructure limited how broadly those gains could be replicated.

The Centers of Excellence for Veteran Student Success (CEVSS) pilot, established through H.R. 6358, represents a necessary next step. Rather than introducing a new model, CEVSS formalizes and extends what campuses and SVA chapters have already shown to work. By institutionalizing early identification, coordinated advising, and outcome tracking, the pilot transforms effective but contingent practices into durable systems. It preserves the human-centered strengths of veteran centers while enabling data-informed coordination across academic, workforce, and support domains.

In doing so, CEVSS elevates spaces long supported by SVA chapters from informal hubs to institutional anchors. It ensures that belonging, professional network formation, and pathways to economic mobility are no longer dependent on local circumstance, but embedded within how institutions identify, support, and prepare student veterans for life beyond the classroom. As education delivery and labor markets continue to evolve, renewed investment in this infrastructure ensures that campuses are equipped not only to serve veterans, but to see them early enough to support their full potential.

What remains is the opportunity to pair institutional commitment with technical capability. The federal government and its partners already possess the infrastructure necessary to make student veteran visibility timely, accurate, and actionable. Through secure, governed systems such as the VA's Lighthouse API,<sup>33</sup> it is now technically feasible to allow colleges and universities, at the point of application, to confirm veteran status and education benefit eligibility with VA data. This capability would not impose new burdens on veterans. It would simply allow institutions, with appropriate consent and safeguards, to recognize veterans early enough to begin aligning support before friction

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<sup>33</sup> The Department of Veterans Affairs Lighthouse platform is VA's secure, federally governed interoperability framework that allows authorized partners to verify veteran benefit eligibility through encrypted, standards-based application programming interfaces (APIs). Built as part of VA's modernization strategy, Lighthouse operates within VA's identity verification and access control systems and uses federally required security protocols, including tokenized authentication and role-based authorization, to ensure that only approved entities access only the minimum necessary data. All access is logged, auditable, and compliant with federal privacy and cybersecurity standards under the Privacy Act, FISMA, and NIST guidance. This infrastructure allows institutions, with appropriate consent, to verify education benefit eligibility earlier and more accurately while preserving veteran data privacy and control. See more at: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, VA Lighthouse Platform, <https://developer.va.gov>.

emerges. Veterans would retain the ability to opt out of this verification process, but the default availability of accurate, secure matching would ensure that invisibility is no longer the structural norm.

The implications of this early visibility are immediate and practical. Institutions could begin the benefits certification process before a student arrives on campus, reducing delays in housing allowance and tuition payments that frequently destabilize transition. Advisors could proactively connect veterans to resources calibrated to their circumstances, including childcare options, workforce opportunities aligned with academic programs, mental health services, and community support networks in the surrounding area. Career services offices could facilitate early introductions to employers seeking veteran talent, allowing veterans to build professional capital while still enrolled rather than after graduation. In each of these cases, the difference is timing. Support delivered before disruption preserves momentum in ways that support delivered after disruption cannot fully restore.

Equally important, verified veteran identification would allow institutions to measure outcomes with validity and precision. Today, student veteran success is often inferred rather than observed, limited by incomplete or inconsistent identification. Secure data matching would allow colleges and universities to assess retention, completion, and workforce outcomes with the same rigor applied to other student populations. This visibility would strengthen institutional accountability while enabling policymakers to distinguish between programs that produce meaningful results and those that do not.

This opportunity extends beyond individual campuses. Integrating veteran identifiers into existing national data systems, including the National Student Clearinghouse's semi-annual enrollment and completion data pulls, would allow student veteran outcomes to be tracked with the same fidelity as other demographic groups. Such integration would not require the creation of new reporting structures, but rather the extension of existing ones to include a population whose educational trajectory is already supported by federal investment. The result would be national evidence base capable of informing policy, guiding institutional improvement, and ensuring that veteran education benefits are delivering their intended return.

The same principle applies to VA's information technology and electronic health record (EHR) modernization. Reliable, interoperable systems are foundational to safe, coordinated, high quality care and to ensuring veterans' records are accurate and accessible across VA facilities and community providers. As VA advances its phased EHR deployment in 2026 and 2027, sustained readiness investments, end user training, and post-go-live support are essential to minimize disruption and improve care coordination. This is larger than a technology upgrade; it is the backbone of VA's ability to deliver timely, veteran-centered care at scale, and it requires sustained funding, leadership oversight, and cybersecurity protections to succeed.

The technology to enhance the service capacity for veterans using data already exists. What is required now is the policy clarity and interagency coordination to make it available for its intended purpose. When health information seamlessly follows a veteran from care to care, when institutions can see veterans clearly and early, veterans receive services with precision rather than approximation. Visibility enables preparation. Preparation preserves stability. Stability allows education to fulfill its function as a pathway to economic mobility and national contribution.

### **Stability from Separation to Career Placement**

Even the strongest education and data systems cannot function without stability during transition. The period immediately following separation from military service is marked by convergence rather than sequence. Enrollment decisions, employment, housing, healthcare, and family responsibilities arrive at once, often without the benefit of institutional coordination. For many veterans, this compression of demands occurs while they are navigating a new

identity, new expectations, and unfamiliar systems. Disruption during this window can result in delayed completion or withdrawal, even among students who are otherwise academically strong and highly motivated.

Housing stability sits at the center of this challenge. Expanding access to Monthly Housing Allowance for online and hybrid learners through H.R. 3753 reflects how veterans actually pursue education today. Flexible learning modalities allow veterans to balance work, caregiving, disability, and geographic constraints that would otherwise place education out of reach. Yet housing support policies have not kept pace with these realities. When veterans are forced to choose between modality flexibility and housing stability, persistence suffers. Ensuring MHA parity across delivery formats preserves continuity and allows veterans to remain enrolled without sacrificing essential supports.

This policy shift, however, must be implemented thoughtfully. SVA recognizes the importance of preserving the integrity of in-person learning environments and campus engagement. The intent of expanding MHA access is not to incentivize withdrawal from physical campuses, but to prevent veterans from being penalized when life circumstances require flexible learning. With appropriate safeguards, transparency, and continued investment in campus-based services, MHA parity can support persistence without undermining residential education or student engagement.

Income stability further reinforces this continuity. VA Work-Study reform, discussed earlier, plays a critical stabilizing role by providing predictable earnings during education. For veterans balancing tuition, housing, and family responsibilities, even modest income disruptions, such as the loss of MHA between semesters, can trigger enrollment interruptions. Paid, flexible work aligned with campus and community needs allows veterans to remain focused on completion while building experience that supports career placement.

Stability during transition also extends beyond material conditions. Mental health remains a significant pressure point for veterans in the traditional student-age population. National data consistently show elevated suicide risk among veterans under the age of 35, with transition periods representing moments of heightened vulnerability.<sup>34</sup> Academic stress, financial strain, social isolation, and delays in accessing care compound during the first years after separation. When these pressures go unaddressed, they can derail educational progress and threaten well-being. Preventing suicide among veterans, including those pursuing higher education, remains a priority that intersects mental health care, clinical practice, and patient trust.

Recent years have underscored the urgency of this challenge on college campuses. Student veterans experience suicide risk at higher rates than their non-veteran peers of the same age,<sup>35</sup> and institutions across the country have mourned the loss of student veterans whose deaths reverberated through their academic and military-connected communities. These losses have occurred at both large public universities and community colleges, often prompting

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<sup>34</sup> National data indicate that veterans under the age of 35 face elevated suicide risk compared to their civilian peers, with the period immediately following separation representing a point of heightened vulnerability, particularly when mental healthcare access is delayed or fragmented. Evaluations of the Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership (VITAL) program further suggest that embedding VA mental health services within campus environments improves access to care, reduces barriers to engagement, and supports persistence among student veterans navigating transition. See Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2023). Suicide rates among veterans and nonveterans aged 18–34. <https://www.cdc.gov/suicide>; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. (2022). Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership (VITAL) program evaluation. Veterans Health Administration; and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. (2024). National veteran suicide prevention annual report. [https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide\\_prevention](https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention)

<sup>35</sup> See Valenstein, M., Clive, R., Ganoczy, D., Garlick, J., Walters, H. M., West, B. T., ... Pfeiffer, P. N. (2022). A nationally representative sample of veteran and matched non-veteran college students: Mental health symptoms, suicidal ideation, and mental health treatment. *Journal of American College Health*, 70(2), 436–445. <https://doi-org.libproxy.library.wmich.edu/10.1080/07448481.2020.1753751>

campus-wide reflection on whether warning signs were missed or care arrived too late.<sup>36</sup> In this context, some veterans, clinicians, and advocates have called for renewed attention to how mental health treatment decisions are communicated and documented, particularly around psychiatric medications. Exploring whether more formalized, written informed consent practices could strengthen shared decision-making, patient trust, and continuity of care merits careful consideration. Framed appropriately, this discussion is not about questioning the legitimacy of mental health treatment, but about ensuring that veterans are fully informed, engaged partners in their care during a period of heightened vulnerability.

Further, programs such as the Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership (VITAL) initiative demonstrate how integrated mental healthcare can mitigate these risks. By embedding VA mental health professionals within campus environments, VITAL reduces barriers to care, normalizes help-seeking, and connects veterans to services before crises escalate. Stability in education is inseparable from stability in health, and policies that align academic support with accessible mental healthcare strengthen both persistence and safety.

Stability, then, is not a peripheral concern, but rather is the condition that allows all other investments to function as intended. Workforce alignment loses effectiveness when housing is insecure. Data visibility loses value when students disengage before support can take hold. Education benefits cannot deliver outcomes when veterans are forced to pause or withdraw due to preventable disruption. This emphasis reflects what SVA's early *Basic Needs and Wellness* research has already begun to show. When material security and social support are present, veterans persist, complete credentials, and advance toward careers with confidence. When stability is compromised, even strong systems struggle to compensate. Ensuring continuity from separation through career placement is therefore essential to realizing the full promise of veteran education policy.

## **Advancing a Coherent Strategy**

Taken together, these priorities form a sequenced and mutually reinforcing strategy rooted in evidence and experience. Workforce-aligned education creates opportunity. Data visibility enables timely and effective support. Stability allows veterans to persist long enough to realize both.

This approach reflects what veterans are already doing successfully and asks how policy can better match their commitment and capacity. Advancing these priorities in concert moves veteran education policy beyond access and toward outcomes, ensuring that higher education fulfills its role as a driver of economic mobility rather than a detour from it.

This is why SVA supports H.R. 1965, H.R. 6358, H.R. 5965, H.R. 6011, and H.R. 3753. Together, these measures strengthen the continuum from service to education to career, honoring the promise made to those who serve by building systems capable of delivering opportunity at scale.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>36</sup>At the 19<sup>th</sup> Annual SVA NatCon, breakout sessions on suicide prevention — including protocols shared from institutions such as Columbia University in partnership with The American Legion — drew participants from across the student veteran community, many of whom shared personal experiences with mental health challenges and loss. Student veterans involved in awareness campaigns around the country, such as the “Ruck the Ball” suicide awareness events led by SVA chapters at The University of Toledo and Bowling Green State University, likewise highlight the urgency of addressing risk factors early and comprehensively on campus and in community partnerships.

The original GI Bill did more than reward service; it democratized access to education, expanded the American middle class, and reshaped the nation's economic and civic landscape for generations. Its returns went beyond the symbolic; they were structural. By investing in veterans' education, the nation strengthened its workforce, accelerated innovation, stabilized communities, and reinforced democratic participation at scale. Few federal policies have delivered such enduring national dividends.

That lesson remains as relevant now as it was in 1944. Today's student veterans are again positioned at the intersection of service, skill, and national need. They bring leadership forged under pressure, technical expertise developed in complex environments, and a demonstrated commitment to public purpose. When education policy allows that capacity to translate efficiently into civilian careers, the result is not only individual mobility but collective and societal resilience. When it does not, the nation absorbs the cost through slowed workforce development, underutilized talent, and weakened institutional trust.

The evidence presented in this testimony makes clear that student veterans are succeeding at scale. Where outcomes fall short, the cause is not a lack of effort or ability, but misalignment between systems built for a different era and the realities veterans now navigate. Policies that strengthen the bridge between education and employment, improve visibility across institutions, and preserve stability during transition cannot therefore be considered ancillary benefits but must be regarded as investments in national capacity.

In an economy defined by rapid technological change, global competition, and persistent workforce shortages, veterans represent one of the nation's most reliable pipelines of adaptable, mission-oriented talent. Ensuring that education accelerates, rather than delays, their entry into the civilian labor market is both a matter of obligation and of strategic interest. A system that allows veterans to stall or disengage is one that leaves national strength unrealized. The measures advanced here reflect a coherent approach to that challenge. They honor the promise made to those who serve by ensuring that education delivers not just access, but outcomes. At the same time, they advance priorities that transcend party: economic growth, workforce readiness, institutional efficiency, and national security.

Student Veterans of America urges Congress to act with the clarity this moment demands. The question before us is not whether the nation can afford to strengthen veteran education policy. History shows it cannot afford not to. When veterans move from service into education and onward into meaningful work without friction or delay, the nation gains in prosperity, stability, and strength. That is the return on investment the GI Bill has always delivered, and it is the return these policies are designed to secure once again.

SVA stands ready to continue this work in partnership with Congress, not only in service of veterans, but in service of the country they have already sworn to defend.

SVA is grateful to Chairmen Moran and Bost, Ranking Members Blumenthal and Takano, and Members of Senate and House Committees on Veterans' Affairs for an invitation to provide the organization's policy priorities for the next year. SVA is committed to working with Congress to advance these policy priorities and ensure student veterans receive the support they need to thrive in higher education and beyond.