STATEMENT OF
JEFFREY STEELE, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE COMMISSION
THE AMERICAN LEGION
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ON
PENDING LEGISLATION

JUNE 26, 2013

Chairman Flores, Ranking Member Takano and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of Commander Koutz and the 2.4 million members of The American Legion, we thank you and your colleagues for the work you do in support of our service members and veterans as well as their families. The hard work of this Subcommittee in creating significant legislation has left a positive impact on our military and veterans' community.

The American Legion through its Economic Division is responsible for ensuring that U.S. veterans have the opportunity to provide, with honor and dignity, the economic necessities of life for themselves and their families. We are experts in programs involving veterans education, small business, employment, veterans preference, VA home loans, homeless veterans, training, licensing and certification, transition, USERRA, and other issues related to economics. We assist veterans in obtaining employment through our 170 veteran-targeted job fairs around the country with RecruitMilitary and Military.com, our two online partnerships with Avue and Monster, and provide information, guidance and, when appropriate, referrals for employment. Our Small Business Task Force can provide you tools to assist you in obtaining loans, technical assistance and other guidance. To end homelessness and prevent homelessness among veterans, we coordinate a Homeless Veterans Task Force to augment veteran service providers and fill in the gaps where no programs exist to assist veterans.

As a grassroots organization, The American Legion draws upon the strength of its membership to provide guidance on policies in the form of resolutions passed during annual national conventions or at meetings of the National Executive Committee. The will of the membership of the Legion is expressed through these resolutions, which support or oppose policy decisions on topics of concern, whether for veterans, the children and youth of America, a strong national defense, or the principles of Americanism. The support and positions of The American Legion on any legislation is derived from the guidance of these resolutions and the founding documents of our organization.

H.R. 331

To direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to permit the centralized reporting of veteran enrollment by certain groups, districts, and consortiums of educational institutions.

This bill amends veterans' educational assistance program reporting requirements under which enrolled veterans (or eligible persons) and educational institutions must report enrollment information to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA). It requires individuals and educational institutions participating in the post-Vietnam era and post-9/11 veterans' educational assistance programs to report to the Secretary such enrollment and any updates on interruption or termination of the education (thereby making the enrollment reporting requirements for the post-Vietnam and post-9/11 programs consistent with other veterans' educational programs). Finally, it defines "educational institution" to permit the inclusion of groups, districts, or consortiums of separately accredited educational institutions located in the same state that are organized in a manner facilitating the centralized reporting of enrollments.

Increasing program consistency and streamlining reporting requirements are often desirable administrative improvements. In this case, for example, community college districts in a state that have multiple schools would be allowed to centralize their veterans' educational assistance program reporting information and submit only one report for the district as a whole rather than having to submit multiple reports for each school. The American Legion is pleased to participate in and recognize ongoing efforts like this to improve the Department of Veterans Affairs' products, services and processes.

The American Legion supports this bill.

H.R. 821

To amend the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act (SCRA) to provide surviving spouses with certain protections relating to mortgages and mortgage foreclosures, and for other purposes.

This bill amends the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act, for five years after enactment of this Act, to afford surviving spouses of service members who die while in the military and whose death is service-connected the same protections against sale, foreclosure, and seizure of property currently applicable to their husbands who while in military service are unable to meet an obligation on real or personal property. It requires each lending institution subject to specified requirements for a maximum 6% rate of interest on a service member's debts incurred before military service to designate one of its employees as a compliance officer responsible for: (1) ensuring the institution's compliance with such requirements, and (2) distributing information to service members whose obligations and liabilities are covered by such requirements. Furthermore, it requires such a lending institution that had annual assets for the preceding fiscal year of $10 billion or more to maintain a toll-free telephone number and make it available on its primary Internet website. Finally, it amends the *Honoring America's Veterans and Caring for Camp Lejeune Families Act of 2012* to extend through 2017 the period of specified protections for service members against mortgage foreclosures.

The American Legion supports this effort to amend SCRA. Our service members should be afforded every reasonable protection and right possible when deployed in service to our nation. Additionally, these safeguards should be in place not only for our active-duty service members but should extend to their families in situations of serious injury or death.

The American Legion supports this bill.

H.R. 1357

To amend the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 to improve the Veterans Retraining Assistance Program by providing assistance under such program for certain training programs that are considered less than full-time.

The American Legion has no position on this bill.

H.R. 1796: *Troop Talent Act of 2013*

To ensure that the education and training provided members of the Armed Forces and veterans better assists members and veterans in obtaining civilian certifications and licenses, and for other purposes.

A veteran employment measure designed to ease service members' transitions to civilian employment, this bill would bolster efforts to streamline the process of obtaining certifications and occupational licenses and help veterans put to use skills learned in the military.

The American Legion has been urging federal and state lawmakers, as well as industry leaders, to streamline the military-to-civilian licensing and certification process for a decade and a half now. Most recently, our organization passed Resolution No. 326: *Support Licensure and Certification of Active-Duty and Selected Reserve Personnel* supporting efforts to eliminate employment barriers that impede the timely and successful transfer of military job skills to the civilian labor market. Enactment of legislation consistent with this effort, like the *Troop Talent Act,* will benefit not only the service member, but those who eventually employ him or her in the civilian work-force. By encouraging the Department of Defense to provide more information about military training and curriculum to organizations involved with private sector credentialing process, this legislation will help them better account for military training in the awarding of credentials. Continuing high levels of unemployment and ongoing troop withdrawals underscore the need to build job opportunities for returning veterans.

Civilian credentialing can contribute to service member and veteran personal and professional career development if done right; however, the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) lacks subject matter experts that can provide recommendations to improve VA's licensing and certification database; improve the quality of State Approving Agency (SAA) approval process; review applications used by the SAA's; and develop and update material on licensing and certification for use in training SAA staff.

Therefore, it is extremely important that the Professional Certification and Licensure Advisory Committee (PCLAC) be reauthorized, another important provision in this bill. It will bring those subject matter experts to assist VA where they lack expertise in assessing certification and licensing programs, as well as assisting in the development of new material to support SAA's in the field.

PCLAC, which was terminated in 2006, advised the Secretary of Veterans Affairs on VA's implementation of licensing and certification test provisions contained in Title 38, United States Code, §3689, and recommended administrative and/or legislative changes to improve that program. The Committee also monitored the nationwide consistency of the licensure and certification test approval process. The Committee submitted its recommendations and reports to the Secretary and could also submit its reports to the Congress.

The last few years have seen a major cultural shift for the military, with top defense officials supporting service member credentialing, as well as expanded support for veteran credentialing on Capitol Hill with the passage of several Legion-sponsored and supported pieces of legislation.

The American Legion believes there is a definite need to resume this independent body with expertise in matters relating to licensing and certification which can present new solutions to VA's senior leadership and congressional members as well as other stakeholders in light of the aforementioned developments.

The American Legion strongly supports this bill

H.R. 1842: *Military Family Home Protection Act*

To amend the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act (SCRA) to improve the protections for servicemembers, surviving spouses, and disabled veterans against mortgage foreclosures, and for other purposes.

This legislation extends critical protections to our nation's service members, veterans with disabilities, and the surviving spouses of fallen heroes who have made the ultimate sacrifice to protect our nation. The bill ensures that the homes of service members are protected when they are most vulnerable—when they are placing their lives at risk overseas or recovering from service-related injuries here at home. Most importantly, this bill holds the banks accountable with higher civil penalties for mortgage-related violations and prohibits banks from discriminating against those service members, veterans, and surviving spouses protected under SCRA.

Similar legislation supported by The American Legion passed overwhelmingly in the House of Representative during the last Congress by a vote of 394 to 27. Similar legislation was passed by the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, but was never considered on the Senate floor.

Since the 2008 collapse of the real estate market, tens of thousands of military service members have lost their homes to foreclosure. America simply cannot afford to have our men and women in Afghanistan, or elsewhere, distracted by concerns over whether someone is seeking a default

judgment against them back home, or evicting their spouse and children, or selling their house at an auction sale. This much needed legislation provides essential foreclosure protections for our heroes, who should not have to worry about losing their home while deployed overseas. Providing the flexibility laid out in this legislation is the least we can do for the brave men and women who put their lives on the line day in and day out.

The American Legion supports this bill.

H.R. 2011: *Veterans' Advisory Committee on Education Improvement Act of 2013*

To amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for a two-year extension of the Veterans' Advisory Committee on Education.

The Veterans' Advisory Committee on Education (VACOE) is composed of members who are prominent leaders in education/training, particularly in veterans' education and training. The American Legion has long served as a member and can attest from organizational experience to the value of this advisory committee. It is able to provide valuable insight and advice to the VA Secretary and Members of Congress. The American Legion believes there is a definite need to maintain this independent body that is able to analyze and develop intelligent, practical solutions to difficult educational issues and to present those solutions to VA's senior leadership and congressional members as well as other stakeholders.

Salient issues include the need to help evaluate the implementation of Public Law 112-249, requiring schools to provide academic performance data to the VA and President Obama's Executive Order #13607 establishing guidelines for institutions catering to service members, veterans or qualified family members. Also ripe for attention is the larger question of qualitative and quantitative metrics for assessing student outcomes.

Lastly, VACOE meetings are open to the public. Any individual/group can attend and address VACOE with issues they wish to bring to the attention of VA leadership. In turn, this advisory committee can pass those concerns onto VA and Members of Congress.

The American Legion supports this bill.

H.R. 2150: *Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Programs Reauthorization Act of 2013*

To amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for a five-year extension to the homeless veterans reintegration programs.

The American Legion notes there are still approximately 62,000 homeless veterans on the street each night. This number, compounded with 160,000 service members entering the private sector each year since 2001 with at least a third of them potentially suffering from physical and/or mental injuries, indicates intensive and numerous programs are warranted to prevent and assist homeless veterans. The purpose of Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP) is to provide services to assist in reintegrating homeless veterans into meaningful employment within the labor force and to stimulate the development of effective service delivery systems that will

address the complex problems facing homeless veterans. HVRP is the only nationwide program that focuses on assisting homeless veterans to reintegrate into the workforce. It is an essential part of the strategy to meet to eliminate veteran homelessness by 2015.

The American Legion strongly supports the reauthorization of HVRP for fiscal years 2013 to 2018.

H.R. 2210: *Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry Scholarship Improvements Act of 2013*

To amend title 38, United States Code, to expand the eligibility of children of certain deceased veterans to educational assistance under the Post-9/11 Educational Assistance Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The Fry Scholarship was created by Public Law 111-32 in honor of Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry and amended the Post 9/11 GI Bill to include the children of service members who die in the line of duty after September 10, 2001. This bill would make education benefits available to the children of service members awarded the Purple Heart for an injury and dies as a result of that injury during the 60-day period beginning on the date of the person's discharge or release from active duty service in the Armed Forces.

As an unfortunate consequence of the global war on terror, many children of our active-duty military personnel are now members of single-parent families. It is estimated that over 11,000 children have lost a parent in the war overseas. That number continues to grow each day. The American Legion is deeply committed to the plight of the children whose parents die on active duty in service to this nation and we are actively working to ensure that all those children who want a post-secondary education will be provided one. That is why we established a Legacy Scholarship Fund to help meet the shortfalls these children experience, and there have been significant shortfalls in government money allotted to these children.

The American Legion has been a leader in the passage and improvement of the GI Bill, from the original GI Bill in World War II, through the passage of the Post 9-11 GI Bill, through several iterations of Post 9-11 GI Bill Improvement Acts. The American Legion supports the full transferability of GI Bill benefits and approves of this expansion of better education benefits to additional children of those who have made the ultimate sacrifice.

The American Legion supports this bill.

H.R.2327

To amend title 38, United States Code, to establish in the Department of Veterans Affairs a Veterans Economic Opportunity Administration, and for other purposes

The American Legion has no position on this bill.

Draft bill

To amend title 38, United States Code, to codify and improve the election requirements for the receipt of educational assistance under the Post 9/11 Educational Assistance program of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

This bill represents another administrative improvement to the processing of the Post 9/11 GI Bill. The American Legion is pleased to participate in and recognize ongoing efforts like this to improve the Department of Veterans Affairs' products, services and processes.

The American Legion supports this bill.

As always, The American Legion thanks this Subcommittee for the opportunity to explain the position of the over 2.4 million veteran members of this organization.

For additional information regarding this testimony, please contact Mr. Jeffrey Steele at The American Legion's Legislative Division, 202-263-2987 or jsteele@legion.org.