STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ON
ACCELERATED EDUCATION PAYMENTS

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The American Legion appreciates this opportunity to share its views on accelerated education payments and the impact regarding veterans' education.

The American Legion supports granting veterans the option to request an accelerated payment of all monthly educational benefits upon meeting the criteria for eligibility for Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) financial payments. The selection of courses veterans undergo remain exclusively the decision of the individual veteran, and all earned veterans' education benefits should be made available to veterans in support of their endeavors. Accelerated education payments allow veterans to achieve education goals in the manner that they decide. Binding the time frame of an education payout may restrict educational options for some veterans.

In addition to the traditional institutions for higher learning, MGIB benefits can be used for training at Non-College-Degree Institutions, On-the-Job or Apprenticeship Training, Independent, and Distance or Internet training. The MGIB also allows the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to reimburse veterans for the fees charged for national tests for admission to institutions of higher learning and national tests providing an opportunity for course credit at institutions of higher learning. Examples of tests covered are SAT, GRE, CLEP, GMAT, LSAT, etc. The MGIB for veterans, and not those eligible under Survivors and Dependents Educational Assistance (DEA), is available for Flight Training and Correspondence Training.

The significance of expanding the scope of accelerated education payments is that the preceding categories are eligible for MGIB payments, yet **excluded** from accelerated education payments. The American Legion recommends that all MGIB-approved courses, including the On-the-job training (OJT) and Apprenticeship courses, become eligible for accelerated education payments.

The American Legion supports the expansion of Public Law 107-103 to include:

1. Survivors and Dependents Educational Assistance (DEA, or Chapter 35)
2. Post-Vietnam Era Veterans' Educational Assistance Program (VEAP, or Chapter 32)
3. Reserve Educational Assistance Program (REAP, or Chapter 1607)

ACCELERATED EDUCATION PAYMENTS

The American Legion is deeply concerned with the timely manner that veterans, especially returning wartime veterans, receive their education benefits. Annually, for the past 6 years, approximately 300,000 service members, 90,000 of them belonging to the National Guard and Reserve, enter the civilian sector and have the ability to use their education benefits.

Any delay in receipt of education benefits can adversely affect a veteran's life. There are time restrictions on most veteran education benefits specifically, the National Guard and Reserve must remain in the Selected Reserve to use their earned benefits. Every effort should be made to ensure that the MGIB and related veterans' education benefits are delivered without delay.

Public Law 107-103 allows accelerated payments to be made available to MGIB-AD (Chapter 30) recipients only at a lump sum payment of 60 percent of tuition and fees for certain high cost, high tech programs if the cost of the degree exceeds 200 percent monthly rate of basic educational assistance allowance otherwise payable. To qualify, a veteran must be enrolled in a high tech program and certify that they intend to seek employment in a high tech industry as defined by VA. The American Legion applauds the initiative of veterans entering the fields of life science, engineering, computer specialties, electronics and aerospace; however, the type of program available for accelerated payments should not be limited.

Ironically, courses in education are excluded from this program. Truck driving, program evaluation, policy, law, communication, early childhood education, human resources, recreation, and liberal arts are other programs that are also excluded.

The minimum threshold to qualify for accelerated education payments based upon the FY 2007 pay rates for Chapter 30 is at least $2150 a month for full time, $1612 for three quarter time, $1075 for half time to one quarter time, and $537 for less that one quarter time. The credit hours for these categories are 12, 9-11, 6-8 and less than 6 respectfully. For graduate level training, the training time is determined by the college.

The American Legion is concerned with the ranges of program costs throughout the country. Consideration should be made to lower the 200 percent threshold for receiving accelerated payments.

The American Legion supports legislation that would conform to our recommendations. Increasing the educational benefit available through the MGIB will provide a better incentive to veterans to complete a program with immediate employment results, without the concern of going into short-term debt.

Amending title 38, United States Code, to expand the scope of programs of education for which accelerated education payments of all educational assistance under the MGIB is needed. Accelerated education payments would greatly assist qualified veterans enrolled in an approved program of education that leads to employment, such as truck driving. This expansion would give veterans more educational options and a better diversity of vocations.

Not every veteran is destined for college; therefore, the MGIB needs to be more accessible for those veterans with vocational aspirations other than college. The overall costs of these "short-term" vocational training and licensing programs far exceed the monthly stipend provided under the traditional "college-student-for-36-months" approach in the current MGIB.

Veterans should be afforded the opportunity to attend compressed high-front-end-cost programs that will lead to the vocation of their choice. Veterans who attend these programs should have the opportunity to use a portion of their earned benefits at an accelerated rate. Expanded options will also increase utilization of the MGIB.

In addition, a higher percentage of today's service members are married (with children in the majority of cases) when they are discharged. Meeting the financial obligations to sustain and maintain a household is paramount, and often serves as a major obstacle to their timely use of the MGIB. Every effort must be made to empower these, and every veteran, with options to make the best vocational choice to help them achieve the American dream.

In addition, The American Legion strongly supports the expansion of the program to include other short-term programs of value that could lead to the immediate employment of veterans.

CURRENT PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH LIMITED APPROVED PROGRAMS FOR ACCELERATED MGIB PAYMENTS

Frequent Active Duty Activations among Reserve Forces

The American Legion asserts that due to the frequent call-ups of the National Guard and Reserve Forces, veterans are forced to divert from the traditional semester schedule in an attempt to finish their programs before the next call-up.

National Guard and Reserve units are continuously training in preparation for war. Leadership development, combat lifesaver, communications, language, airborne, and air assault are examples of courses that are conducted year round. One in particular, leadership development courses, are required for any promotion.

Student service members must choose to either enter these courses to advance their military career and better prepare them and their units for war, or remain at their universities thereby slowing their military advancement progression. Accelerated education payments will allow for these individuals to enter short-term/ high cost programs that allow them to complete the course within the window between military requirements.

Expansion beyond Chapter 30

It is important to note that accelerated education payments are only available to Chapter 30 benefits; Reserve Education Assistance Program (REAP) beneficiaries and other programs are barred from receiving accelerated payments.

An example is a veteran who has deployed 15 months to Iraq earning her 36 months of benefits at a rate of $645/month. If she chose to enter a high cost/short term program such as a teaching certification program she would only be able to use her education benefits at the monthly rate. Furthermore, her benefit would only be available to her as long as she remains an active member of the Selective Reserve.

Programs other than high-tech

Sgt. Bruce Dunlap is currently recovering from devastating injuries at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center from his service in Iraq. He wishes to enter the vocational rehabilitation program and work towards becoming a teacher. Bruce eagerly wants to be able to become self-sufficient and restart his civilian life.

This amazingly strong willed person has further expressed his desire to begin teaching and after a few years of employment enter a masters program with a more specific focus on advanced education. Bruce plans on using his MGIB to pay for his masters program while simultaneously working as a teacher. He would take high cost/short-term night courses; however, these programs are not currently eligible for accelerated payments.

Sgt. Dunlap's educational plan is not specifically unique; civilians have similar style education plans that also encompass other fields. What is unique, and can never be overlooked, is that this story is that of a veteran. Specifically, he is a severely injured veteran that volunteered to enlist in the military and serve his country. It is our obligation to ensure that the earned educational benefits of America's veterans are actually of value to those seeking a non-traditional route to their education.

INCREASE IN USE OF VETERANS' EDUCATION BENEFITS

Starting in 2001, the total use of education benefits by veterans continues to increase.
In FY 2006, approximately 470,000 individuals received education benefits. This equates to approximately 3 million courses taken by veterans.

With the increasing number of eligible veterans and the increasing quantity of discharged veterans, the need for assistance and implementation of all elements of veterans' benefits will continue to rise.

Accelerated education payments of MGIB benefits will assist veterans to use their education benefits in a manner that best serves them.

CONCLUUSION

Historically, The American Legion has encouraged the development of essential benefits to help attract and retain service members into the Armed Services, as well as to assist them in making the best possible transition back to the civilian community. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, the "GI Bill of Rights" is an historic piece of legislation, authored by Harry W. Colmery, Past National Commander of The American Legion, that enabled millions of veterans

to purchase their first homes, attend college, obtain vocational training, and start private businesses.

Accelerated education payments are an instrument that will allow earned education benefits to be used for all MGIB approved courses. In such, the number of beneficiaries and total value of the MGIB program will increase. Furthermore, in a time of war, every effort to promote and facilitate the use of veterans' education benefits must be a national priority.

The American Legion believes that honorable military service, combined with improved education and vocational training opportunities, enhances an individual, increases diversity, and betters society as a whole. The education pillar is continuous and ever evolving. The diminishment of support for educational opportunities for veterans will decrease the ability to recruit new service members, and unfairly subject veterans to barriers of benefits that they have earned.

The American Legion appreciates the opportunity to present this statement for the record.