STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ON
STATE APPROVING AGENCIES

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Madam Chairwoman and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to submit the views of The American Legion regarding the Evolution of State Approving Agencies.

STATE APPROVING AGENCIES

State Approving Agencies (SAAs) are responsible for approving and supervising programs of education for the training of veterans, eligible dependents, and eligible members of the National Guard and the Reserves. SAAs grew out of the original GI Bill of Rights that became law in 1944. Though SAAs have their foundation in Federal law, SAAs operate as part of state governments. SAAs approve programs leading to vocational, educational or professional objectives. These include vocational certificates, high school diplomas, GEDs, degrees, apprenticeships, on-the-job training, flight training, correspondence training and programs leading to required certification to practice in a profession.

Effective March 1, 2001, SAAs assumed responsibility for approving organizations offering tests required to secure local, state, Federal or industry-based licenses or certifications. SAAs maintain a computer database that lists all approved education and training facilities in the state and their approved program offerings. The mission of these SAAs is to provide technical assistance and regulatory expertise to educational and training administrators to ensure that quality programs are available to veterans and other eligible persons.

The Post 9/11 Veterans Education Assistance Act was signed into law on June 30, 2008, and is scheduled for implementation on August 1, 2009. Four very different education programs will soon exist: the Post 9/11 GI Bill, Montgomery GI Bill, Montgomery GI Bill-Selected Reserve, and the Reserve Educational Assistance Program.

This new bill goes well beyond helping to pay for tuition and fees; many veterans who served after September 11, 2001, will get full tuition and fees, a new monthly housing stipend, and a $1,000 a year stipend for books and supplies. The new bill also gives Reserve and Guard members who have been activated since 9/11 access to the same GI Bill benefits.

Another added benefit to the Post 9/11 GI Bill is the Yellow Ribbon Program. This program allows institutions of higher learning (degree granting institutions) in the United States to voluntarily enter into an agreement with VA to fund tuition expenses that exceed the highest public in-state undergraduate tuition rate. The institution can contribute up to 50 percent of those expenses and VA will match the same amount as the institution, enhancing school reimbursements and the value of the New GI Bill. Veterans who are going through a graduate program or seeking out-of-state tuition and fees can also use this program. Regarding concerns of proper resources to implement the new program, VA has hired and begun training 530 temporary veterans' claims examiners to support implementation and assure payments will be made beginning August 1, 2009.

It should be noted that SAAs have not had an increase in funding in the last four years (inflation rose 14 percent during this time period). As already mentioned, VA was allowed to conduct substantial hiring to process new claims. By contrast, SAAs have not been in a position to hire even though the Post 9/11 GI Bill work load has ballooned for these agencies as well. In order to carry out its expanded missions in light of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, SAAs will require an additional $5 million per year for the next three years (total of $15 million). This funding would allow SAAs to continue to fulfill these duties:

- make determinations regarding the quality and integrity of all kinds of learning experiences (institutional, job training, flight, correspondence, etc.);
- work with employers to develop and enroll veterans in job training programs (Apprenticeships and OJT);
- assess and approve tests for professional and occupational licensing and certification;
- perform outreach activities to increase the utilization of the GI Bills including briefings during transition assistance programs (TAP) and retirement seminars, and sending out mailings to recently discharged veterans and Selected Reserve personnel;
- provide advice and guidance to veterans, guardsmen, reservists, and other GI Bill benefit recipients, as well as educators, trainers, and others who counsel veterans; and,
- train VA School Certifying Officials at all educational institutions and job training establishments.

The Post 9/11 GI Bill has dramatically changed the work requirement for SAAs. Adequate funding will provide additional staffing and other resources for SAAs to fulfill its mission. The benefit stream flows through SAAs as well as the VA, and without fully functioning SAAs, veterans and other benefit recipients will not receive their educational benefits in a smooth, orderly, and timely manner.

In a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report in March 2007 entitled "VA Student Financial Aid; Management Actions Needed to Reduce Overlap in Approving Education and Training Programs and to Assess State Approving Agencies" (GAO-07-384) focused on the need to "ensure that Federal dollars are spent efficiently and effectively." GAO recommended that VA should require SAAs to track and report data on resources spent on approval activities, such as site visits, catalog review, and outreach in a cost-efficient manner. The American Legion agrees. Additionally, GAO recommended that VA establish outcome-oriented performance measures to assess the effectiveness of SAAs efforts. The American Legion fully agrees.

Finally, GAO recommended that VA should collaborate with other agencies to identify any duplicate efforts and use the agency's administrative and regulatory authority to streamline the approval process. The American Legion agrees.

The American Legion strongly supports SAAs and is committed to working with them along with the VA and other Federal agencies to ensure that America's veterans receive the finest education and training programs so they can live a dignified and successful life after serving this great nation. Again, thank you for the opportunity to submit the opinion of The American Legion on this issue.