STATEMENT OF ROBERT MADDEN
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TO THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE
ON
IMPROVEMENTS TO THE POST-9/11 GI BILL

JULY 21, 2010

Chairman Akaka, Ranking member Burr, and fellow members of the Committee, The American Legion appreciates the opportunity to submit testimony on: "improvements to the Post-9/11 GI Bill".

The Post 9/11 Veterans Education Assistance Act was signed into law on June 30, 2008, and was implemented on August 1, 2009. 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. However, this bill only covers Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs). Work remains.

Not all veterans attend IHLs. Many veterans prefer traditional employment and/or may require employment for personal or family reasons. The American Legion recommends that these programs be included under the Post 9/11 GI Bill (Chapter 33): flight training; correspondence schools; vocational schools; apprentice programs; and, on-the-job training programs.

Chapter 33 needs to be modified to include non-college degree programs. Veterans choosing to use their educational benefits for other than IHLs are able to use them under the existing Chapters 30, 1606, or 1607; however, in those instances the benefit recipients are not entitled to either the housing stipend or the allowance for books and supplies. The American Legion believes that veterans should never be limited in the manner they use their educational benefits. According to VA, four of the top ten institutions serving veterans and the active military are online institutions. In fiscal year 2008, over 645,000 active duty military took voluntary education courses that were paid by DOD, and 60 percent of these students chose to study online. Further, in fiscal year 2006, there were approximately 840,000 military students (active and veterans) enrolled in voluntary education programs both at the secondary and post-secondary level, with approximately 75 percent of instruction being offered via online institutions. Due to this trend, paying veterans a lesser benefit when they receive credit via distance learning is a mistake.

Veterans choose to attend online institutions because of location, job, family commitments, or disability. Another reason for high participation of veterans in distance learning is the emphasis

on adults, which is why online universities are noted for their "GI-friendly" policies and practices. Further, online programs are offered throughout the year, allowing service members, veterans to take lighter course loads or to finish their degree programs in shorter time periods. Accordingly, The American Legion is recommending that the allowances for distance learning be made similar to those in effect for residential learning. This assures equity for veterans including such individuals as single parents and veterans with significant medical disabilities.

In addition, The American Legion strongly recommends that Title 32 Active Guard Reserve (AGR) be included for eligibility under Chapter 33. In 2008, there were almost 30,000 Army National Guard and 13,500 Air National Guard service members serving on Title 32. The American Legion also recommends a comprehensive review of VA's separate tuition and fees cap system to ensure that veterans will not lose any value in their education benefits due to this reimbursement method. A lack of funding has arisen for veterans attending private schools in states like Massachusetts, California, and Washington, DC, due to this separate tuition and fees cap system. Other improvements would include provisions for lifelong learning and additional financial support for educational institutions providing programs and services to veterans.

S. 3447

Senate 3447, "Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Improvements Act of 2010"; a bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to improve educational assistance for veterans who served in the Armed Forces after September 11, 2001, and for other purposes.

The American Legion has identified current issues with the Post-9/11 GI Bill through resolutions passed at our National Executive Committee meeting in October 2009. These technical fixes will provide definition on what educational benefit every veteran who served after September 11, 2001 will receive. S. 3447 is a comprehensive bill which is designed to correct those fixes which The American Legion has been advocating for.

Section 2

Section two outlines the addition of title 32 Active Guard Reserve (AGR) for those have defended this country after September 11, 2001 within the United States Borders. The American Legion recommends that the "and" be changed to a "or". The language reads that you must be a member of the Inspector Instructor Core and to be called up for active service, thereby severely limiting the number of individuals who would qualify for this benefit, essentially leaving out many members of AGR that were called up in defense of our country after September11, 2001.

Section 3

Section three identifies the tuition and fee cap issue. S. 3447 fully covers tuition at any public school and sets a price tag for private and colleges at a national average. S. 3447 is expanding and simplifying the yellow ribbon program. The American Legion recommends that private schools average be set at $20,000. With this program, those who attend private colleges would receive less and at some points considerable less than those who attended public institutions. The goal of the Post-9/11 GI Bill is to assist veterans in getting an education, not burdening them with endless amounts of student loans to cover their education.

In addition, section three identifies veterans who are attending classes through online institution. The amount that is set is half of the national average, which entails veterans attending distance learning, would receive $666.00 per month. The American Legion recommends that the housing allowance be set off the Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) of where the student lives. Those veterans with families and work need a flexible way to advance their career and get a college education. These veterans deserve the same equitable benefit as those who attend "bricks and mortars" education institution.

Section three identifies three groups that were excluded from the original Post-9/11 GI Bill: vocational school, correspondence school, apprenticeship/OJT programs, and flight training. The American Legion supports allowing veterans to use their post-9/11 GI Bill to use towards a vocational school. Vocational school training does not require four years in order to become certified and thus allows veterans to return to the workplace quicker and with a gained skills or trade. S. 3447 does not allow for a books stipend to be paid to the student who attends vocational schools. The American Legion recommends that those who are attending vocational schools to be awarded the annual book stipend.

S. 3447 does include language to include apprenticeship/OJT/flight training programs. The American Legion indentified apprenticeship/OJT/flight training as programs which should be included and accessed by veterans with the post-9/11 GI Bill benefit. By allowing veterans to participate in apprenticeship/OJT/flight training, through the Post-9/11 GI Bill, veterans will receive tiered housing allowance in the sum of 75%, 55% and 35%, thus increasing their amount of benefit and allowing them to support themselves and their families, while receiving training.

Section 4

Section four has identified licensure and certification testing. The current law allows a one-time, up to $2,000, test. S. 3447 outlines allowing veterans to for unlimited testing but using 1/12 of the amount of the amount of tuition charges at an educational institution. The American Legion recommends allowing students the opportunity to receive up to $2,000 worth of reimbursement for multiple tests/certification without a change to entitlement. If the veterans should exceed the $2,000 then it should be changed in the national average BAH. This will equalize the benefit instead of using a large portion of entitlement for a test or certification.

Section 6

Section six discusses the transferability of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. S. 3447 is designed to allow those who have served since September 11, 2001 but retired after the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI bill, to transfer their eligibility to their family members, per the approval of the Department of Defense. The American Legion has posted their resolution which outline allowing those who served in defense of our great country but retired before they could transfer their entitlement, to be allowed to do so. The American Legion supports the passage of technical amendments that allows deserving veterans the ability to transfer educational benefits to family members.

Section 9

Section outlines the disparity that educational institutions receive for enrolling veterans on their campus. The American Legion supports increasing the reporting fees for educational institutions

and additionally, recommends increasing that amount to $25.00, per veteran. Certifying officials on campus play a critical role in the student-veterans life. They are responsible for making sure the veterans receives their earned benefit. The certifying official is usually the first person the veteran comes into contact with. The American Legion understands that there is a need for additional certifying officials on campus and increasing the reporting amount would allow educational institutions to increase their level of support for veterans in hiring more individuals in the veterans arena and also providing additional services for veterans.

Summary

The American Legion continues to support service members, veterans and their families in gaining an education and supporting their career choices. S. 3447 acknowledges, transfer of educational benefits to dependents, even if they retired before the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, the addition of non-degree granting institutions (vocation, apprenticeship/OJT and flight training), including the housing allowance for online distance learners, and the inclusion of the title 32 AGR. The American Legion believes this bill will greatly serve our veteran population. In addition, by providing this benefit to our nation's veterans we are providing a valuable service to the rest of the country. America's veterans will become taxpaying members of society and will help in decreasing the number of veterans unemployed. This is a bill about education, but should be viewed at as a bill about the employment of veterans. Lets continue to support our troops by providing the equitable education benefit and returning these heroes to work.

Thank you Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Burr and members of the committee. Thank you for allowing The American Legion to present out views on this very important matter.