**STATEMENT OF**

**OF**

**THE AMERICAN LEGION**

**BEFORE THE**

**SUBCOMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPORTUNITY**
**COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**
**UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**ON**

**"PENDING AND DRAFT LEGISLATION"**

**MAY 18, 2022**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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|---|---|
| H.R. 2650 – Military Spouse Licensing Relief Act of 2021, *pg 1* | **Support** |
| H.R. 3950 – Veterans Medical Legal Partnerships Act of 2021, *pg 2* | **Support** |
| H.R. 4702 – Military Spouse Tax Act, *pg 3* | **Support** |
| H.R. 6124 – VA Home Loan GRACE Act of 2021, *pg 4* | **Support** |
| ANS to H.R. 6307 – Tiny Homes for Homeless Veterans Act, *pg 5* | **Support** |
| Discussion Draft – Emergency Relief for Servicemembers Act, *pg 6* | **Support** |
| Discussion Draft – Building Credit Access for Veterans Act of 2022, *pg 7* | **No position** |
| Discussion Draft – Improving the VA Home Loan Act of 2022, *pg 8* | **Support** |
| Discussion Draft – To expand and improve the Department of Veterans Affairs Covid–19 veteran rapid retraining assistance program and high technology pilot program, *pg 9* | **Support with amendments** |
| Discussion Draft – To amend title 38, United States Code, to extend Department of Veterans Affairs assistance for individuals residing temporarily in housing owned by a family member, *pg 10* | **Support** |
| Discussion Draft – To amend title 38, United States Code, to establish in the Department of Veterans Affairs an Office of Food Insecurity, *pg 11* | **No position** |
| Discussion Draft – To amend title 38, United States Code, to expand eligibility for certain Department of Veterans Affairs programs for homeless veterans, *pg 11* | **No position** |
| Discussion Draft – To amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for the eligibility for educational assistance under the Post- 9/11 Educational Assistance Program of certain individuals who receive sole survivorship discharges, *pg 11* | **Support** |
| Discussion Draft – To amend title 38, United States Code, to extend authority for supportive services for very low-income veteran families in permanent housing, *pg 12* | **Support** |
| Discussion Draft – To amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for the approval of certain study-abroad programs for purposes of the educational assistance programs of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes, *pg 13* | **Support** |
| Discussion Draft - To amend title 38, United States Code, to extend certain Department of Veterans Affairs programs for homeless veterans, *pg 14* | **Support** |
| Discussion Draft - To direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to seek to enter into an agreement with an entity to carry out a pilot program under which such entity shall connect homeless veterans to a network of supportive services, *pg 15* | **Support** |

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Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, and distinguished members of the committee, on behalf of National Commander Paul E. Dillard and the nearly two-million dues-paying members of The American Legion, we thank you for the opportunity to comment on pending legislation considered before this Subcommittee. The American Legion is directed by millions of active Legionnaires who dedicate their time and resources to the continued service of veterans and their families. As a resolution-based organization, our positions are guided by more than 103 years of advocacy and resolutions that originate at the grassroots level of our organization. Every time The American Legion testifies, we offer a direct voice from the veteran community to Congress.

## H.R. 2650 - Military Spouse Licensing Relief Act of 2021

*To amend the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act to provide for the portability of professional licenses of members of the uniformed services and their spouses, and for other purposes.*

On average, a servicemember will move once every two to three years due to assignment changes or a permanent change of station. As a result of these frequent changes, military spouses with careers requiring a special license or certificate face unique challenges. These licenses and certifications do not always transfer from one state to another. As of February 2021, up to 34 percent of military spouses are in a licensed profession.[1] Additionally, long wait periods further exacerbate the high unemployment and underemployment. Currently, only 26 states recognize a military spouse's license originating from another state.[2] Of the remaining 24 states, three have a recognition process excluding many professions, 18 only recognize a license if the military spouse's home state has an equivalent training process, and three may or may not choose to recognize the license.

H.R. 2650 would modify Title VII of *the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act* to ensure servicemembers or spouses with a professional license or certificate in good standing in one

[1] Schultz, Jennifer & DuBois, Gretchenn. "Military Spouse Employment Policies." National Conference of State Legislatures (February 2021). www.ncsl.org/research/military-and-veterans-affairs/military-spouse-employment-policies.aspx. Accessed May 6, 2022.
[2] U.S. Department of Labor. "Military Spouse Interstate License Recognition Options." https://bit.ly/3wCR2hJ. Accessed April 21, 2022.

jurisdiction may be recognized at a similar scope of practice and discipline in a new jurisdiction when relocating. This legislation also addresses interstate licensure compacts permitting licensees to operate in multiple jurisdictions. The American Legion supports reducing barriers to professional licensure for servicemembers and military spouses by facilitating their transfer and use in new jurisdictions following a military-ordered change in residency.

Through Resolution No 338: *Support Licensure and Certification of Servicemembers, Veterans, and Spouses*, The American Legion supports efforts to eliminate spousal employment barriers through advocacy.[3] Spouses credentials must be recognized regardless of location. Military spouses deserve to have careers of their own as well.

**The American Legion supports H.R. 2650 *as currently written*.**

## H.R. 3950 – Veterans Medical Legal Partnerships Act of 2021

*To amend the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968 to authorize a state veterans assistance program, and for other purposes.*

Medical-legal partnerships (MLPs) are holistic care models comprised of legal professionals and healthcare providers to collaborate and address social and legal needs negatively affecting the health outcomes of low-income veterans and their families.[4] This structure allows legal staff and volunteers to provide services to marginalized clients, many of whom are homeless and suffer from severe service-connected mental conditions (or injuries).[5] MLP lawyers offer legal services for a variety of issues, such as helping people overcome legal barriers to housing and eviction, healthcare, and consumer debt.[6]

Compared to the general U.S. population, the veteran population experiences disproportionate rates of homelessness, mental health issues, and legal issues.[7] Department of Veterans Affairs MLPs have shown to be successful in helping veterans with these challenges, but they are limited due to current restrictions.[8] First off, 31 MLPs nationwide is not enough to reach the 1.5 million

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[3] The American Legion Resolution No. 338 (2016): *Support Licensure and Certification of Servicemembers, Veterans and Spouses.* https://archive.legion.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12203/5656/2016N338.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

[4] Jack Tsai, Margaret Middleton, Randye Retkin, Cindy Johnson, Kevin Kenneally, Scott Sherman, and Robert A. Rosenheck, "Partnerships Between Health Care and Legal Providers in the Veterans Health Administration," *Psychiatric Services* 68, no. 4 (2017): 321-323 https://ps.psychiatryonline.org/doi/full/10.1176/appi.ps.201600486

[5] "How CVLC Works." Connecticut Veterans Legal Center (November 2020). https://ctveteranslegal.org/how-cvlc-works. Accessed May 10, 2022.

[6] Jack Tsai, Margaret Middleton, Jennifer Villegas, Cindy Johnson, Randye Retkin, Alison Seidman, Scott Sherman, and Robert A. Rosenheck,"Medical-Legal Partnerships at Veterans Affairs Medical Centers Improved Housing and Psychosocial Outcomes For Vets," *Health Affairs* 36, no. 12 (2017): 2195-2203. www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hlthaff.2017.0759. Accessed May 20, 2022.

[7] Ibid.

[8] "Article: Two-year study of MLP Services Showed Improved Housing and Psychosocial Outcomes for Veterans." National Center for Medical Legal Partnership (December 2017). https://medical-legalpartnership.org/mlp-resources/veterans-mental-health. Accessed May 10, 2022.

veterans at risk of homelessness.[9] Second, while Veterans Health Administration authorizes the allocation of medical workforce space for collaborative MLP partnerships, legal centers are responsible for securing the funding.[10] This leads to MLPs relying on a patchwork of funding sources for support and struggle with sustainability.[11]

The American Legion supports comprehensive and holistic approaches, such as MLPs, to provide medical and legal assistance for homeless veterans and veterans struggling with mental health issues. The American Legion also desires the improvement of MLPs to become more financially robust and accessible to veterans throughout the country so that veterans across the country can benefit from their services. This legislation would increase the number and financial stability of MLPs by amending the *Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968* to authorize the U.S. Attorney General to fund MLP nonprofit grants. These MLPs would assist veterans at risk of homelessness, unemployment, or veterans whose medical needs place them at risk of recidivism, reoffending, or becoming victims of crime.

Through Resolution No. 238: *Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act,* The American Legion supports legislation that will expand and improve the care provided to veterans and servicemembers who have mental health issues or are at risk for suicide.[12]

**The American Legion supports H.R. 3950 *as currently written*.**

## H.R. 4702 – Military Spouse Tax Act

*To amend the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act to provide spouses of servicemembers an option to elect their home residence or domicile for filing State income taxes and for other purposes.*

Servicemembers and their families are required to relocate to different bases, in different states, with different state tax laws. To remedy the logistical tax challenges associated with frequent relocation, *the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act* (SCRA) allows servicemembers to keep their residency in one place throughout their military service rather than frequently changing their domicile after each relocation.[13] Unfortunately, SCRA does not grant that same right to military spouses, even though they frequently relocate upon receiving military orders to relocate. In 2009, *the Military Spouse Residency Relief Act of 2009* (MSRRA) partially remedied this by allowing military spouses to keep the same residency as their Active-Duty spouses after relocating.

[9] "Facts About Homeless Veterans." Pine Street Inn. www.pinestreetinn.org/news_events/facts_about_homeless_veterans. Accessed April 28, 2022.
[10] Jack Tsai, Margaret Middleton, Randye Retkin, Cindy Johnson, Kevin Kenneally, Scott Sherman, and Robert A. Rosenheck. "Partnerships Between Health Care and Legal Providers in the Veterans Health Administration," *Psychiatric Services* 68, no. 4 (2017): 321-323 https://ps.psychiatryonline.org/doi/full/10.1176/appi.ps.201600486.
[11] Trott, Jennifer, Theiss, Joanna, and Peterson, Alana. "VA Medical-Legal Partnership Readiness Guide: Building and Strengthening Medical-Legal Partnerships for Veterans." 2019. National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership. Pp. 1-46.
[12] The American Resolution No. 238 (2016): *Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act*. https://archive.legion.org/handle/20.500.12203/5562.
[13] Morris, George. "The Servicemembers Civil Relief Act Saves on Taxes." InCharge Debt Solutions (December 2021). www.incharge.org/military-money/servicemembers-civil-relief-act-saves-on-taxes. Accessed May 10, 2022

However, current law still does not let military spouses choose their own state of residency.[14] This causes undue hardship to military families seeking to follow local state tax laws when filing their taxes. The American Legion supports remedying unjust and unfair tax policies that have a disparate impact on servicemembers and their spouses by amending SCRA. This legislation would eliminate the disparate treatment that harms servicemembers and their families by amending SCRA to allow military spouses to determine which state they declare as their domicile for tax purposes.

Through Resolution No. 84: *Support and Strengthen the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act*, The American Legion supports amending the current SCRA to include residency benefits to military spouses for tax purposes.[15]

**The American Legion supports H.R. 4702 *as currently written*.**

## H.R. 6124 – VA Home Loan GRACE Act of 2021

*To amend title 38, United States Code, to increase the maximum guaranty amount for loans made to certain veterans under the laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and for other purposes.*

Veterans who served 90 continuous days in wartime, or 181 days in peacetime, and received an honorable discharge, are eligible to utilize Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) home loan program.[16] VA's Home Loan Program was established in 1944 and has helped over 24 million veterans build equity and wealth through homeownership.[17] The loan currently provides basic coverage and bonus coverage. The basic coverage is 25 percent for loan amounts under $144,000, and a bonus coverage is 25 percent for any loan over $144,000 and up to the Freddie Mac Conforming Loan level, which is $647,200.[18] The basic and bonus loans allow veterans to purchase two homes, which is beneficial for servicemembers who relocate to different bases and wish to buy a house when they move instead of renting.

Veterans often face difficulties when trying to purchase a second home with their bonus entitlement because the home loan must be less than $144,001. This limits the ability of veterans to buy less expensive housing, which is especially difficult when moving to an area with a lower cost of living compared to where the first house was purchased. Additionally, veterans who used their bonus entitlement prior to 2020 were capped at 25 percent of the Freddie Mac Conforming Loan level, while veterans who used their benefit after 2020 were not limited to this restriction.[19]

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[14] "The Military Spouse Residency Relief Act (MSRRA)." H&R Block (August 2021). https://bit.ly/3N6pg3s. Accessed May 10, 2022.
[15] The American Legion Resolution No. 84 (2017): *Support and Strengthen the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act.* https://archive.legion.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12203/6936/2017N084.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.
[16] Bundrick, Hal M. "VA Loan Requirements and Eligibility Guidelines 2022." NerdWallet (December 2021). www.nerdwallet.com/article/mortgages/va-loan-eligibility-requirements. Accessed May 9, 2022
[17] "National and State VA Loan Stats from Veterans United Home Loans." Veterans United. Accessed May 4, 2022. www.veteransunited.com/education/tools/stats/
[18] "VA Home Loan Limits," Department of Veterans Affairs. www.va.gov/housing-assistance/home-loans/loan-limits/?msclkid=345db947d0a011ec8dfa3634463194a4. Accessed May 10, 2022.
[19] Ibid.

As the original author of the VA Home Loan Program through *the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944*, The American Legion welcomes continual improvements eliminating barriers to servicemembers, veterans, and their families from accessing their hard-earned benefits. If veterans buy their first home in an area with a high cost of living and then later move to an area with a lower cost of living, they should still be able to purchase a second home of their choosing with their VA Home Loan.

This legislation would amend the VA Loan Program by increasing the bonus entitlement from 25 percent to 50 percent, which would allow buyers to utilize their bonus entitlement to purchase homes less than $144,000. Lastly, this legislation would allow VA to inflict a civil penalty on those who would abuse the VA Home Loan Program in instances of a false certification to ensure the program's integrity under these revised conditions. Through Resolution No. 329: *Support Home Loan Guaranty Program,* The American Legion supports legislation that will improve and strengthen the Loan Guaranty Service's ability to serve America's veterans.[20]

**The American Legion supports H.R. 6124 *as currently written*.**

## ANS to H.R. 6307 – Tiny Homes for Homeless Veterans Act

*To amend title 38, United States Code, to establish a pilot program to build tiny homes for homeless veterans, and for other purposes.*

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) began its current strategy to address veteran homelessness in 2009 with the launch of the National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans.[21] Today, VA continues to look for innovative ways to tackle this issue. However, in 2020, reports from the Department of Housing and Urban Development showed approximately 38,000 homeless veterans representing six percent of the U.S. veteran population.[22] Having a place to live does not solve all problems for a homeless veteran, but it provides a place for the veteran to stabilize their life. It gives the veteran a mailing address to have their disability benefits notices sent to ensure an active stream of income is utilized.[23]

While many organizations across the country have responded to veteran homelessness by building tiny home villages, funding for these projects is mainly from private donors and individual

[20] The American Resolution No. 329 (2016): *Support Home Loan Guaranty Program*. https://archive.legion.org/handle/20.500.12203/5646.
[21] "VA Research on: Homelessness." Office of Research & Development. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022. https://bit.ly/39SAR87. Accessed May 10, 2022.
[22] Casey, Michael. "Thousands of Smartphones Purchased by VA Went Unused." The Washington Post (May 2022). www.washingtonpost.com/politics/thousands-of-smartphones-purchased-by-va-went-unused/2022/05/05/0bea620a-cc92-11ec-b7ee-74f09d827ca6_story.html. Accessed May 10, 2022.
[23] "Reps. Mace and Kilmer Introduce Tiny Homes to Tackle Veteran Homelessness." Representative Nancy Mace (January 2022). https://mace.house.gov/media/press-releases/reps-mace-and-kilmer-introduce-tiny-homes-tackle-veteran-homelessness. Accessed May 10, 2022.

donations.[24] This legislation would codify this new best practice by empowering VA to carry out a pilot program to make grants to facilitate the creation of five villages of tiny homes across the U.S. with associated supportive services. The homes would need to be energy efficient with low carbon footprints.

To be eligible for a grant, an entity would need to submit to VA an application that provides a description of its long-term goals for the project and a list of all supportive services the entity intends to provide. It would also need to include the number of veterans the village will be capable of housing. A grant recipient would use grant funds for village construction and supportive job skills services including cooking skills, installing finish woods, and learning general tiny home design concepts.

The American Legion has supported this innovative effort through its Homeless Veterans Task Force, which serves as a resource to facilitate assistance with helping veterans connect to help find shelter if they are homeless or at risk of being homeless.[25] Across the U.S., American Legion posts have supported tiny home construction for veterans at RV parks through fundraisers and direct donations.[26]

Through Resolution No. 24: *Support Finding and Changes to the Department of Veterans Affairs Grant and Per Diem (GPD) Program,* The American Legion supports congressional efforts to promote the development and provision of supportive housing to help homeless veterans achieve residential stability, increase their skills level and/or income, and obtain greater self-management.[27] Empowering organizations to build tiny homes will ensure access to more housing for veterans, and allow the federal government to keep pace with a private sector best practice to address veteran homelessness.

**The American Legion supports the ANS to H.R. 6307 *as currently written.***

## Discussion Draft - Emergency Relief for Servicemembers Act

*To amend the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act to authorize the termination of certain consumer service contracts by a servicemember who enters into such a contract after receiving military orders for permanent change of station, but then receives a stop movement order due to an emergency situation, or a dependent of such a servicemember.*

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[24] Schnell, Mychael. "Schwarzenegger Donates 25 Tiny Homes to Homeless Vets in LA." The Hill (December 2021). www.thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/587256-schwarzenegger-donates-25-tiny-homes-to-homeless-vets-in-la/. Accessed May 10, 2022.

[25] "Homeless Veterans Task Force." The American Legion. https://www.legion.org/careers/homelesstaskforce. Accessed May 10, 2022.

[26] "Hitting Homelessness at the Community Level." The American Legion (February 2020). https://www.legion.org/homelessveterans/248255/hitting-homelessness-community-level. Accessed May 10, 2022

[27] The American Legion Resolution No. 24 (2018): *Support Funding and Changes to the Department of Veterans Affairs Grant and Per Diem Program*. https://archive.legion.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12203/9920/2018F024.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

During the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, servicemembers across the country preparing to embark on permanent change of stations (PCS) routinely received "stop movement orders." A stop movement order is given to military personnel by the Department of Defense (DoD) during an emergency situation that prohibits all movement besides "mission essential movement." If a servicemember receives a stop movement order, they are legally prohibited from moving.

The unique circumstance of this prohibition adversely impacted military families who had signed lease and service contracts in anticipation of relocation for a PCS order. The situation leaves servicemembers and their families stuck in a contract for an unused service due to the stop movement order prohibiting them from relocating. As a result, military families are forced to incur paying area-specific contract costs at their current duty station and their intended PCS location.

*The Servicemembers Civil Relief Act* (SCRA) provides additional legal and financial protections for servicemembers during uniformed service. Public Law 116-158 amended SCRA to expand lease protections for servicemembers under stop movement orders due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the safeguards only cover residential and vehicle leases.[28]

This draft legislation resolves the oversight by granting servicemembers and dependents the authority to retroactively exit out of area-specific telecommunication and fitness program contracts due to unexpected changes in military orders in response to an emergency. Servicemembers should not be forced to pay for contracts that they cannot use due to military orders. The American Legion applauds the Committee's attention towards amending SCRA appropriately.

Through Resolution No. 84: *Support and Strengthen the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act*, The American Legion supports amending SCRA to include protections for members of the armed forces issued deployment and duty assignment orders against fees and fines.[29]

**The American Legion supports this draft legislation *as currently written.***

## Discussion Draft – Building Credit Access for Veterans Act of 2022

*To require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out a pilot program on using alternative credit scoring information for veterans and members of the Armed Forces, and for other purposes.*

The provisions of this bill fall outside the scope of established resolutions of The American Legion. The American Legion is a resolution-based, grassroots organization that takes positions on legislation based on resolutions passed by the membership or in meetings of the National Executive Committee. The American Legion has no current position on this draft legislation.

[28] *A bill to amend the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act to extend lease protections for servicemembers under stop movement orders in response to a local, national, or global emergency, and for other purposes*. Pub. L. No. 116-158, 134 Stat. 706 (2020).
[29] The American Legion Resolution No. 84: *Support and Strengthen the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act.* https://archive.legion.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12203/6936/2017N084.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

However, The American Legion is currently researching this critical issue to include consulting with our membership to determine the best course of action which best serves veterans.

**Discussion Draft – Improving the VA Home Loan Act of 2022**

*To direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to update the appraisal requirements for certain loans guaranteed by the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.*

With a historically competitive housing market driving many potential homeowners to provide sellers with incentives to accept offers, many veterans utilizing the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Home Loan Program struggle to compete with the flexible financing options available in the civilian housing finance industry. As The American Legion testified during a 2021 House Committee on Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity hearing, rigid appraisals and a lack of qualified appraisers to provide the evaluation lead to a challenging experience for VA Home Loan borrowers seeking to utilize their benefits.[30] One of the primary issues inhibiting veterans from completing a transaction is the appraisal process required by borrowers to execute a VA Home Loan Program.

The shortage of qualified appraisers to provide appraisals has been a persistent challenge to potential veteran homeowners. Current waiting periods have resulted in veterans losing the opportunity to put forward their offer or being required to choose an alternative option to the VA Home Loan Program altogether. Furthermore, rigid assessments mandating minimum property requirements have made it difficult for veterans to be approved for their loans since many borrowers in today's market are providing offers without any contingencies.[31]

This legislation seeks to streamline the appraisal process within the current VA Home Loan Program by providing the Secretary the means to address the inefficiencies that have beleaguered veteran borrowers in an increasingly competitive housing market. It requires VA reexamine waiver requirements and prescribing guidance for time-saving desk top appraisals. Additionally, this legislation instructs VA to consider changing certification requirements for appraisers and minimum property requirements.

The American Legion believes that every veteran deserves the opportunity to navigate the housing market competitively. By providing VA an opportunity to grant flexibility for appraisals, veterans can be more competitive in the housing market and stand a better chance of success in securing their preferred home loan. Through American Legion Resolution No. 329: *Support Home Loan Guaranty Program,* The American Legion supports legislative efforts that improve and strengthen the Loan Guaranty Service's ability to serve America's veterans. [32]

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[30] "Remove Barriers to Veteran Homeownership, Legion Testifies." The American Legion (December 2021). www.legion.org/veteransbenefits/254452/remove-barriers-veteran-homeownership-legion-testifies. Accessed May 10, 2022.

[31] Witt, Gerald. "Competitive Housing Market Presents Challenges for Buyers Using VA Mortgages." Three Creeks Media (2021). https://www.military.com/money/va-loans/competitive-housing-market-presents-challenges-buyers-using-va-mortgages.html. Accessed May 10, 2022.

[32] The American Legion Resolution No. 329 (2016): *Support Home Loan Guaranty Program*. https://archive.legion.org/handle/20.500.12203/5646.

**The American Legion supports this draft legislation *as currently written.***

## Discussion Draft

*To expand and improve the Department of Veterans Affairs Covid–19 veteran rapid retraining assistance program and high technology pilot program, and for other purposes.*

The Veterans Rapid Retraining and Assistance Program (VRRAP) is a provision of the American Rescue Plan that provides funding through tuition assistance and a housing stipend to veterans seeking to gain skills through short-term programs that can quickly be utilized in the job market. The program has a budget of $386 million, a participant limit of 17,250 and a sunset date of December 11th, 2022.[33] Veterans eligible for other service-related education benefits do not qualify for VRRAP. Prospective VRRAP beneficiaries must also meet other eligibility criteria, including meeting certain age restrictions and being unemployed due to the COVID -19 pandemic.[34]

VRRAP is currently underutilized by veterans who may benefit from it. To date, enrollment in the program has failed to meet projections. Unless enrollment significantly increases, hundreds of millions of unused dollars will be relinquished for veteran use.[35] Currently, only veterans between the ages of 22 and 66 are eligible for the program. This provision unnecessarily and unjustly excludes older veterans who may be seeking to contribute to the workforce in the wake of strained economic conditions. Furthermore, the veteran cannot utilize the benefit to pursue either a bachelor's or a graduate degree. This limits program eligibility and consequentially prohibits otherwise able-bodied veterans from participating in workforce development programs.

This draft legislation provides many changes to VRRAP designed to help increase enrollment. It extends the duration that VRRAP funds can be used by beneficiaries from 12 to 24 months and expands VRRAP eligibility to veterans who have up to one month of eligibility from another form of service-connected education assistance. It allows VRRAP eligibility for short-term degree programs that do not exceed 24 credits after the date of enrollment. The legislation would accordingly amend *the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017* to include institutions of higher learning as high technology programs eligible for VRRAP funding. It also eliminates the clause defining the age limit for VRRAP usage, providing those over the age of 66 the opportunity to take advantage of the program. These provisions will expand VRRAP eligibility and give more veterans the opportunity to participate in the program while providing a needed workforce to the market.

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[33] "Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program (VRRAP)." Department of Veterans Affairs. www.va.gov/education/other-va-education-benefits/veteran-rapid-retraining-assistance/?msclkid=f117c9efced911ec96b7aa309c6a350a. Accessed May 8, 2022,

[34] Ibid.

[35] Da Silva, Ricardo. "GI Bill Stakeholders Meeting" Veterans Benefits Administration. January 20, 2021. Microsoft Teams conference call.

While we support this legislation's expansion of VRRAP eligibility to veterans seeking to utilize the benefit to pursue occupations in high-demand industries, The American Legion recommends further extending the sunset date for the program past its current deadline of December 11, 2022. The American Legion provided testimony regarding this during the House Committee on Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity's February hearing "Securing High Demand Jobs for Veterans."[36]

Through Resolution No. 305: *Support the Development of Veterans On-The-Job Training Opportunities*, The American Legion supports the development and implementation of on-the-job training programs for eligible veterans in the public and private sectors.[37]

**The American Legion supports this draft legislation *with amendments*.**

## Discussion Draft

*To amend title 38, United States Code, to extend Department of Veterans Affairs assistance for individuals residing temporarily in housing owned by a family member.*

In 2021, data revealed that 19,750 veterans experienced sheltered homelessness. This number represents nearly eight percent of all sheltered homeless adults in the U.S.[38] The American Legion works passionately to combat homelessness among veterans through advocacy and support, including our state-led Homelessness Veterans Task Force.[39] These Legionnaires work to spotlight the multitude of programs Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) offers to assist veterans at risk of homelessness. The Temporary Residence Adaptation grant (TRA) is one such program.

The issue of homelessness affects veterans in different ways, and the answer for each veteran requires both permanent and temporary solutions. In cases where the veteran's need for assistance is temporary due to medical or life events, the TRA grant may be a solution. This grant is unique in that it provides relief for disabled veterans who reside temporarily in housing owned by a family member. The grant assists the veteran with adapting the residence to make access to necessary areas less challenging for a veteran to navigate.

The current expiration of this grant is December 31, 2022. This legislation will extend this date to September 30, 2027. Through Resolution No. 12: *Housing Options for Homeless Veterans,* The American Legion supports VA considering veteran homeowners who may be willing to lease

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[36] Ibid.
[37] The American Legion Resolution No. 305 (2016): *Support the Development of Veterans On-The-Job Training Opportunities.*
*https://archive.legion.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12203/5620/2016N305.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y*
[38] U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. "Report Suggests that COVID-19 Relief Had Positive Impacts on Sheltered Homelessness." February 4, 2022. https://www.hud.gov/press/press_releases_media_advisories/HUD_No_22_022. Accessed May 10, 2022.
[39] "Homeless Veterans Taskforce." The American Legion. www.legion.org/homelessveterans/taskforce. Accessed May 10, 2022.

living spaces in their residences to homeless veterans as a viable option to end veteran homelessness. [40]

**The American Legion supports this draft legislation *as currently written*.**

**Discussion Draft**

*To amend title 38, United States Code, to establish in the Department of Veterans Affairs an Office of Food Insecurity, and for other purposes.*

The provisions of this bill fall outside the scope of established resolutions of The American Legion. The American Legion is a resolution-based, grassroots organization that takes positions on legislation based on resolutions passed by the membership or in meetings of the National Executive Committee. The American Legion has no current position on this draft legislation. However, The American Legion is currently researching this critical issue to include consulting with our membership to determine the best course of action which best serves veterans.

**Discussion Draft**

*To amend title 38, United States Code, to expand eligibility for, and extend authorization of, certain programs for homeless veterans.*

The provisions of this bill fall outside the scope of established resolutions of The American Legion. The American Legion is a resolution-based, grassroots organization that takes positions on legislation based on resolutions passed by the membership or in meetings of the National Executive Committee. The American Legion has no current position on this draft legislation. However, The American Legion is currently researching this critical issue to include consulting with our membership to determine the best course of action which best serves veterans.

**Discussion Draft**

*To amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for the eligibility for educational assistance under the Department of Veterans Affairs Post-9/11 Educational Assistance Program of certain individuals who receive sole survivorship discharges, and for other purposes.*

Sole survivor veterans are individuals who were discharged from the military after one or more of their siblings died because of hazards with military service, leaving them as the sole surviving son/daughter of a nuclear family.[41] The hazards of military service include being killed, dying as a result of wounds, accident, or disease, becoming permanently 100 percent physically or mentally

[40] The American Legion Resolution No. 12: *Housing Options for Homeless Veterans* https://archive.legion.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12203/14981/2021N012.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

[41] "Sole Surviving Son or Daughter Eligibility Criteria." U.S. Army Human Resources Command. www.hrc.army.mil/content/Sole%20Surviving%20Son%20or%20Daughter. Accessed 10 May 2022.

disabled, or being captured or missing in action .[42] A sole survivor can have surviving siblings, but they must be of the opposite sex.[43] The policy was implemented during World War II to protect families who have lost loved ones in the line of duty from further tragedy and hardship.[44]

Sole survivors are not granted the typical veteran benefits that most servicemembers receive after honorably discharging from the military. *The Hubbard Act of 2009* permits sole survivors some benefits, such as continued payment through the original agreed-upon service period, transitional healthcare, and housing loans, but not Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits. The absence of GI Bill benefits places undue hardship on the sole survivor and their family by forcing them to pay for education while enduring the immense hardship of grieving lost loved ones. It also fails to honor the veteran's service in the Armed Forces before they were required to discharge. This disparate treatment is unjust and creates an undue burden on sole survivor veterans.

The American Legion believes that a veteran is a veteran, and that educational benefits are essential to achieving economic security. The American Legion desires a system that fairly compensates sole survivors instead of punishing them for their forced discharge by excluding them from this earned benefit. This draft legislation would amend a provision in Title 38 to extend Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to sole survivor veterans that served at least 30 days in the Armed Forces. Through Resolution No. 318: *Ensuring the Quality of Servicemember and Veteran Student's Education at Institutions of Higher Education*, The American Legion supports legislation to improve the GI Bill benefits to servicemembers, veterans, and their families to maximize its usage.[45]

**The American Legion supports this draft legislation *as currently written.***

## Discussion Draft

*To amend title 38, United States Code, to extend authority for supportive services for very low-income veteran families in permanent housing.*

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) works to reduce existing veteran homelessness while simultaneously working to prevent veterans from becoming homeless. One of the main lines of effort to prevent veterans from becoming homeless is providing services to very low-income veteran families.[46] Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) prevent veteran homelessness by helping veterans keep their current homes or identifying a new and more suitable housing

[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Baron, Scott. *"Valor of many stripes: remarkable Americans in World War II."* Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2019. p. 64.
[45] The American Legion Resolution No. 318 (2016): *Ensuring the Quality of Servicemember and Veteran Student's Education at Institutions of Higher Education.* https://archive.legion.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12203/5635/2016N318.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.
[46] "Supportive Services for Veteran Families." US Department of Veteran Affairs. www.va.gov/homeless/ssvf/index.html. Accessed May 10, 2022.

situation for the individuals and their families.[47] SSVF was established in 2012 and has since offered its services to 572,787 veterans across the entire United States.[48]

VA has made substantial progress in reducing veteran homelessness, but it is far from reaching its goal of ending the problem altogether. As of 2020, VA estimates that there are still about 37,000 homeless veterans.[49] This number can be partially attributed to veterans struggling in an economy where housing prices are increasing, and the availability of low-income housing is decreasing.[50]

The American Legion supports services to help eliminate veteran homelessness and has testified numerous times about creative solutions we need to help veterans transition into permanent housing. This draft legislation would amend title 38, United States Code, to provide increased funding for very low-income veterans' families in permanent housing for fiscal years 2023 and 2024. This will allow for the continuation and growth of SSVF to continue to reduce and prevent veteran homelessness. Through Resolution No. 12: *Housing Options for Homeless Veterans,* The American Legion urges Congress to continue providing funding to end homelessness among veterans.[51]

**The American Legion supports this draft legislation *as currently written.***

## Discussion Draft

*To amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for the approval of certain study-abroad programs for purposes of the educational assistance programs of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes*

On August 1, 2020, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) updated its policies regarding Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit usage for student veterans applying to study abroad programs.[52] Unfortunately, VBA's new interpretation of Chapter 33 benefits has resulted in the heavily restricted types of study abroad programs. According to the new guidance, the only study abroad programs that would be compliant are those from foreign educational institutions independently approved for GI Bill benefits, domestic educational institutions with an

[47] Ibid.
[48] "FY 2019 SSVF Annual Report." Department of Veterans Affairs (January 2021). www.va.gov/homeless/ssvf/docs/SSVF_Annual_Report_FY19.pdf. Accessed May 10, 2022.
[49] "Point-in-Time (PIT) Count." US Department of Veterans Affairs (January 2022). www.va.gov/homeless/pit_count.asp. Accessed May 10, 2022.
[50] "FY 2019 SSVF Annual Report." Department of Veterans Affairs (January 2021). www.va.gov/homeless/ssvf/docs/SSVF_Annual_Report_FY19.pdf. Accessed May 10, 2022.
[51] The American Legion Resolution No. 12 (2021): *Housing Options for Homeless Veterans.* https://archive.legion.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12203/14981/2021N012.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
[52] "New Guidance on Post-9/11 Veterans Benefits for Education Abroad." NAFSA: Association of International Educators (July 2021). www.nafsa.org/professional-resources/browse-by-interest/new-guidance-post-911-veterans-benefits-education-abroad. Accessed May 10, 2022.

approved overseas campus, or domestic educational institutions without foreign educational institutional or foreign campus involvement.[53]

This draft legislation will allow the VA to approve the course for not more than five years if the educational institution assumes responsibility for the quality and content of the covered study-abroad course. As well, it serves as the certifying official for the course. A covered study abroad course refers to a course given in a foreign country and as a part of an education program offered by an educational institution under contract by another educational institution that offers a course.

The American Legion has supported veterans and the children of veterans receiving the resources they need to study abroad for a long time. In May 2021, The American Legion Legacy Scholarship awarded over $357,000 in financial aid to 32 children of post-9/11 veterans to help them go to the college of their choice as well as could study abroad.[54] One month later, The American Legion published an article showcasing a U.S. Army veteran who used her GI Bill payments to study abroad at the University of Sydney in Australia.[55]

Through Resolution No. 349: *Support Legislation to Improve the Post-9/11 GI Bill,* The American Legion supports legislation ensuring VA and the Post-9/11 GI Bill are a first payer and the non-federal entities for those who require additional funding to go to those veterans.[56] VA must maintain full tuition and fee reimbursement for veterans attending public undergraduate colleges while setting a national standard for private and graduate schools. No veteran should have to sacrifice traditional learning opportunities because of GI Bill loopholes.

**The American Legion supports this draft legislation *as currently written.***

## Discussion Draft

*To amend title 38, United States Code, to extend certain Department of Veterans Affairs programs for homeless veterans.*

Data from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) showed that as of January 2020, nearly eight percent of all homeless adults were veterans.[57] Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has deployed numerous programs to assist homeless veterans and veterans at risk of homelessness, such as HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH), the Homeless

[53] Acting Under Secretary for Benefits Thomas J. Murphy to NAFSA President Dr. Esther Brimmer, June 15, 2021, Department of Veterans Affairs, General Correspondence. www.nafsa.org/sites/default/files/media/document/va-nafsa-061521.pdf. Accessed May 10, 2022.
[54] "Over $357,228 Awarded to Children of Post-9/11 Veterans." The American Legion (May 2022). www.legion.org/scholarships/252520/over-357228-awarded-children-post-911-veterans. Accessed May 10, 2022.
[55] "The Experience of a Lifetime." The American Legion (August 2021). www.legion.org/education/253484/%E2%80%98-experience-lifetime%E2%80%99. Accessed May 10, 2022
[56] The American Legion Resolution No. 349 (2016): *Support Legislation to Improve the Post-9/11 GI Bill.* https://archive.legion.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12203/5668/2016N349.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
[57] "HUD Releases 2020 Annual Homeless Assessment Report Part 1. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) (May 2021). www.hud.gov/press/press_releases_media_advisories/hud_no_21_041. Accessed May 10, 2022.

Providers Grant and Per Diem (GPD) Program, the Enhanced-Use Lease Program, and the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF).[58] The GPD Program makes funding available to VA healthcare facilities and entities eligible for grants and per diem payments to encourage facilities to expand their veteran homelessness programs.[59] SSVF establishes sites to be centers for comprehensive service to homeless, and the Advisory Committee on Homeless Veterans submits a report to Congress annually on how VA veteran homeless programs can improve. All of these programs have shown to successfully reduce and prevent homelessness amongst veterans.

These programs are essential to veterans and their families, but their continuity depends on funds that are approved by Congress on an annual basis. As of now, the funding will last through September 2022. If this end date remains, it will result in hundreds of thousands of veterans scrambling to find and remain in permanent housing. It will also deprive them of much-need healthcare and mental health services. To better serve these various VA veteran homelessness programs, this draft legislation would extend the Advisory Committee on Homeless Veterans from September 30, 2022, to September 30, 2027. It would also amend the Grant Program for Homeless Veterans with Special Needs by striking fiscal year (FY) 2007 through 2022 to FY2022 through 2038 and increase annual funding for the Additional Services at Certain Locations the September 30, 2032.

The American Legion has supported efforts to eradicate veteran homelessness for decades. We've established our own Homeless Veterans Task Force, where we coordinate at the grassroots level to develop and implement initiatives to assist homeless veterans.[60] Through Resolution No. 24: *Support Finding and Changes to the Department of Veterans Affairs Grant and Per Diem (GPD) Program,* The American Legion's makes it a top priority to prevent and end veteran homelessness.[61] Veteran homelessness programs must be modernized to keep with VA's goal to ward off and resolve veteran homelessness. Moving forward, improving assistance given to homeless veterans and veterans at risk of homelessness will continue to be vital.

**The American Legion supports this draft legislation *as currently written.***

## Discussion Draft

*To direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to seek to enter into an agreement with an entity to carry out a pilot program under which such entity shall connect homeless veterans to a network of supportive services, and for other purposes.*

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[58] Health, VHA Office of Mental. "Veterans Affairs." Go to VA.gov, May 27, 2010. https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/housing.asp.

[59] "Grant and Per Diem Program." VA Homeless Programs. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (January 2010). https://www.va.gov/homeless/gpd.asp. Accessed May 10, 2022.

[60] "Homeless Veterans Taskforce." The American Legion. www.legion.org/homelessveterans/taskforce. Accessed May 10, 2022.

[61] The American Legion Resolution No. 24 (2018): *Support Funding and Changes to the Department of Veterans Affairs Grant and Per Diem Program.* https://archive.legion.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12203/9920/2018F024.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

The Department of Housing and Urban Development's Veteran Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program is a collaboration between the HUD's Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) rental assistance program and Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) case management and supportive services for homeless veterans.[62] The program aims to help homeless veterans and their families obtain permanent housing and access to healthcare, mental health treatment, and other services to help them recover and thrive in society.[63]

In 2012, HUD and VA acknowledged they had challenges with streamlining data to capture specific information needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the HUD-VASH program.[64] In response, both HUD and VA transitioned to new electronic systems to improve reliability. However, they still need to align the systems to share information on homeless and at-risk veterans and ensure that the information is complete, accurate, and up to date.[65]

The American Legion advocates comprehensive solutions to help put an end to veteran homelessness. In addition, The American Legion desires that these programs be driven by reliable evidence that can maximize the efficiency of the American taxpayer. This draft legislation directs VA to carry out a pilot program to connect homeless veterans to a network of supportive services. This legislation would also establish a system to track covered individuals and their supported services to produce reliable data that reflects the effectiveness of federally funded programs to end homelessness among veterans.

Through Resolution No. 12: *Housing Options for Homeless Veterans*, The American Legion supports legislation that provides funding to programs that will help end homelessness among veterans.[66]

**The American Legion supports this draft legislation *as currently written*.**

## CONCLUSION

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee; The American Legion thanks you for your leadership and for allowing us the opportunity to explain the positions of our nearly two million members on the importance of these pieces of proposed legislation. Questions concerning this testimony can be directed to Mr. John Kamin, Legislative Associate in The American Legion's Legislative Division at (202) 263-5748, or jkamin@legion.org.

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[62] "U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) Program." Department of Veteran Affairs (February 2022). www.va.gov/homeless/hud-vash.asp. Accessed May 10, 2022.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Government Accountability Office. *Veteran Homelessness: VA and HUD Are Working to Improve Data on Supportive Housing Program."* GAO-12-726 (Washington, DC, 2012). www.gao.gov/assets/gao-12-726.pdf?msclkid=ef2c51e2cd4e11eca7b3afaaa7e35f93. Accessed May 10, 2022.
[65] "HUD-VASH Data from HOMES Made Available to VAMCs." US Department of Housing and Urban Development (December 2019). *www.hudexchange.info/news/hud-vash-data-from-homes-made-available-to-vamcs*. Accessed May 10, 2022.
[66] The American Resolution No. 12 (2021): *Housing Options for Homeless Veterans* https://archive.legion.org/handle/20.500.12203/14981.