

NATIONAL VETERANS EMPLOYMENT & EDUCATION COMMISSION

TOPIC 1: ECONOMY

Consumer confidence has rebounded since recession warnings in the summer, particularly among voters who don't lean toward either major party.

Americans are feeling better about the economy, a trend that, if it continues, could bolster President Trump's prospects for re-election in November.



New York City, the financial center of the United States

Forty percent of Americans say they are better off financially than they were a year ago, and just 19 percent say they are worse off, according to a January survey conducted for The New York Times by the online research firm SurveyMonkey. That's the most positive that respondents have been about the economy in the three years the survey has been conducted.

Other measures of consumer confidence have likewise shown a strong rebound in recent months after falling last summer amid headlines warning of a looming recession.

Views of the economy remain sharply divided along partisan lines, as they have throughout Mr. Trump's presidency. That could dampen the impact of the economy on the election because many voters may view economic news through the lens of their existing political preferences.

But recent gains in confidence have been particularly strong among the voters most likely to be swayed by economic news: independents. True independents — those who say they do not lean toward either major party — had the biggest jump in confidence in the new Times survey.

In a recent survey from The Washington Post and ABC News, 60 percent of independents said Mr. Trump was doing a good job with the economy, up from 46 percent in September.

The increase in confidence among independents is a recent development and might not last. And some sources tell a different story: A long-running measure of consumer sentiment from the University of Michigan showed on Friday that confidence rose over all in January but fell slightly among independents, although confidence is up sharply among all partisan groups since the fall.

The economy's performance is swaying some voters. Samuel Knight did not vote for Mr. Trump in 2016 because he and his evangelical Christian family did not like his personal behavior. But he said that if the election were held today, he would pull the lever for Mr. Trump, largely because of the strong economy.

HOUSEHOLD**DATA****Table A-5. Employment status of the civilian population 18 years and over by veteran status, period of service, and sex, not seasonally adjusted**

[Numbers in thousands]

Employment status, veteran status, and period of service	Total		Men		Women	
	JAN 2019	JAN 2020	JAN 2019	JAN 2020	JAN 2019	JAN 2020
Unemployed	147	149	141	134	6	15
Unemployment rate	4.2	4.4	4.7	4.7	1.2	2.6

The national unemployment rate is 3.6 percent (January 2020). Gulf War II veterans' unemployment rate is 4.4 percent.ⁱ Currently, the unemployment rate for Gulf War II women veterans is 2.6 percent (down from 3.1 percent in December).

TOPIC 2: MEETINGS

On Tuesday, February 18, 2020 the National Veterans Employment & Education Division attended a meeting at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities in Washington, DC, to discuss policy surrounding veteran housing.

On Tuesday, February 18, 2020 the National Veterans Employment & Education Division met with the House Small Business Committee regarding veteran small business opportunities in overseas markets and the role the federal agencies must take on to increase opportunities abroad.

On Tuesday, February 18, 2020 the National Veterans Employment & Education Division met and dropped off Career Fair Materials with the representatives at Andrews AFB, Indian Head Naval Facility, Patuxent River, and Dahlgren Naval Station

On Wednesday, February 19, 2020 the National Veterans Employment & Education Division attended a private roundtable and lunch at the American Enterprise Institute to discuss the recent BO v. Wilkie decision from the United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, and what it might mean for the future of veterans' education benefits.

On Wednesday, February 19, 2020 the National Veterans Employment & Education Division counseled a veteran small business on federal size and control standards in their application to be recognized as a veteran owned small business for the purpose of government contracting.

On Wednesday, February 19, 2020 the National Veterans Employment & Education Division met with Charley Yancy, the TAP coordinator at Henderson Hall. We will discuss future opportunities for collaboration during their TAP classes.

On Thursday, February 20, 2020 the National Veterans Employment & Education Division attended the CNAS Report Launch: “New York State Minority Veterans Needs Assessment.”

On Thursday, February 20, 2020 the National Veterans Employment & Education Division attended a GI Bill Stakeholder Meeting. This monthly meeting will provide an opportunity to hear from Education Service. Topics such as the current workload, new initiatives, ongoing project updates, and other timely items will be discussed.

On Friday, February 21, 2020 the National Veterans Employment & Education Division met with leadership from Customs and Border Protection to discuss the agency’s strategic goals, priorities and their new veterans initiatives.

On Friday, February 21, 2020 the National Veterans Employment & Education Division met with the owners of the Military Spouse Academy. An online teaching platform that educates military spouse on how to be entrepreneurs and engage in digital sales and marketing.

On Friday, February 21, 2020 the National Veterans Employment & Education Division participated in a webinar hosted by the Department of Defense. The discussion will focus on the rollout of TAP concerning the DoD portion.

TOPIC 3: EMPLOYMENT

The renewed focus on veteran employment over the past ten years, particularly among post-9/11 veterans, has led to a number of initiatives to address the issue. In 2011, then-First Lady Michelle Obama and Jill Biden created the White House “Joining Forces” initiative to spotlight issues facing the military community, one of



President Donald Trump with key automobile industry leaders

which was unemployment among veterans and military spouses. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce began its “Hiring Our Heroes” program in 2011 as well, leveraging available federal, state, and local resources to focus on connecting veterans and military spouses with “meaningful employment opportunities.”

Additionally, private sector companies worked together to launch the “100,000 Jobs Mission” to highlight their goal of hiring 100,000 veterans by 2020; having hired more than 500,000 veterans since launching in 2011, the initiative has since rebranded as the “Veteran Jobs Mission.” Veteran employment initiatives also have expanded across the federal government, such as the Corporation for National and Community Service, which focuses on recruiting veterans for service opportunities. And as another example, the Small Business Administration has an Office of Veterans Business Development focusing on providing resources to veteran entrepreneurs, another avenue of post-service employment.

As these efforts have been under way and the economy has improved, unemployment among both veterans and the population writ large has declined. Furthermore, the veteran unemployment rates that exceeded those of nonveterans in the years following the crash of 2008 now have reverted to historical norms, with veterans generally showing lesser rates of unemployment than their nonveteran peers. However, the research suggests this declining veteran unemployment rate may be masking a significant veteran underemployment rate. Though finding a job after service may have become easier, finding not just a job but “the right job” impacts future outcomes as well.



The aforementioned LinkedIn report found that veterans on the LinkedIn platform have higher first-year retention rates than nonveterans and are more likely to be promoted earlier than nonveterans, which are all seemingly positive employment outcomes. Yet, the report also finds one-third of veterans are underemployed and that veterans are more likely than their nonveteran peers to be underemployed.

Significantly, the LinkedIn study was limited to site members having a bachelor’s degree, potentially biasing the sample significantly toward those most likely to succeed in the job market. There also are reports from veteran-serving nonprofits of increased demand for employment assistance services among transitioning veterans. This increase in demand could signal either dissatisfaction with current job prospects, i.e. the potential of underemployment, or simply an increase in awareness of such services.

These findings raise a number of dilemmas and questions that are difficult to answer with existing data. As the Pew Research Center found, transitioning officers are more likely than enlisted personnel to have jobs lined up before they leave the military. Yet these officers are often the population under study in reports of underemployment among veterans, which raises many questions. Is underemployment among officers a matter of just having higher aspirations for employment, or have researchers not looked closely enough at the population of veterans who were enlisted?

The inability to answer questions around the scope and impact of veteran underemployment is part of a larger issue with existing data around veteran employment. While a significant amount of thoughtful and excellent research exists examining transition and economic outcomes of veterans after service, those studying the issue are often stuck between using the blunt instruments of government statistics or the more granular, but often unrepresentative, data provided by convenience sampling of available populations.

TOPIC 4: CAREER FAIRS

On March 5, 2020 The National Veterans Employment and Education Commission in collaboration with Hiring Our Heroes will be conducting the Washington Conference Hiring Fair. The following are the career fair flyer, agenda and list of employers:

AMERICAN LEGION WASHINGTON CONFERENCE HIRING FAIR

MARCH 5, 2020

THURSDAY, MARCH 5

8:00 A.M. - 4:00 P.M.

THE WASHINGTON HILTON
1919 CONNECTICUT AVENUE NW
WASHINGTON, DC 20009



Hiring Our Heroes Hiring events are hands-on career planning events designed to connect members of the local military community with military-ready employers. Attendees will have the opportunity to:

- attend an interactive workshop
- hear insider tips from hiring managers and recruiters
- learn about online tools designed to translate military or volunteer experience on a resume
- build a professional network
- find out about certifications required to segue into high-demand careers

This free professional development event is open to active duty service members, National Guard members, military reservists, veterans, military spouses, and military caregivers. Come ready with your resume to learn about resources that help connect military families with meaningful employment at local and national employers.

HIRING OUR HEROES
U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE FOUNDATION

NEED A RESUME?

Visit

ResumeEngine.org

or

MyCareerSpark.org

Resume Engine and Career Spark are the quickest and easiest way to send your resume to employers at the Career Fair. Build a powerful resume at ResumeEngine.org for service members and MyCareerSpark.org for military spouses. Powered by Toyota.

REGISTER NOW

Visit

HiringOurHeroes.org/events
to find upcoming events
and register now.

AGENDA/TIMELINE:

8:00 am	JOB SEEKER CHECK-IN
8:20 am – 8:30 am	OPENING REMARKS <ul style="list-style-type: none">Mr. Lou Celli – Executive Director The American Legion, Washington DC Office
8:30 am – 10:00 am	CIVILIAN RESUME WORKSHOP <ul style="list-style-type: none">Ms. Kashi Russell – The American Legion<ul style="list-style-type: none">Location: Holmead, Lobby Level
10:00 am – 11:00 am	FINANCIAL LITERACY WORKSHOP <ul style="list-style-type: none">Ms. Judy Viccellio – V-STAR, LLC<ul style="list-style-type: none">Location: Holmead, Lobby Level
11:00 am – 12:00 pm	LINKEDIN – SELF BRANDING WORKSHOP <ul style="list-style-type: none">Mr. Ariel De Jesus – The American Legion<ul style="list-style-type: none">Location: Holmead, Lobby Level
12:00 pm	EMPLOYER CHECK IN
12:00 pm – 1:00 pm	NETWORKING LUNCHEON <ul style="list-style-type: none">Lunch between Job Seekers and Employers to get insight about what employers are looking for in during the hiring process.
1:00 pm – 4:00 pm	CAREER FAIR <ul style="list-style-type: none">The American Legion and Hiring Our Heroes<ul style="list-style-type: none">Location: International Grand Ballroom, Terrace Level
1:00 pm – 2:00 pm	FEDERAL RESUME WORKSHOP <ul style="list-style-type: none">Ms. Renetta Bradford – National Veterans Employment (VA)<ul style="list-style-type: none">Location: Holmead, Lobby Level



U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
FOUNDATION

Washington, DC HIRING FAIR

March 5, 2020

PARTICIPATING EMPLOYERS

AS OF: 7Feb20

Airstreams Renewables, Inc.
Amazon
ARServices
AvalonBay Communities
CACI International Inc.
Capital One
Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services
Chenega Corporation- Security Business Unit
Fairfax County Fire and Rescue
Federal Emergency Management Agency
Fors Marsh Group
Frontier
General Dynamics Mission Systems
George Mason University
Geostabilization International
Herc Rentals
Hilton
International Gourmet Foods, Inc.
Jim Koons Automotive
Leidos
Lincoln Property/Lincoln Military Housing
Lowe's
M Powered Strategies
MassMutual of Greater Richmond
Montgomery County 9-1-1 Emergency
Communications Center
Montgomery County Police
Nakupuna Companies
National Industry for the Blind
Newport News Shipbuilding, A Division
of Huntington Ingalls Industries
NEXCOM
Office of the Chief Financial Officer of the
District of Columbia
Oracle Corporation
Orbis Inc.
PAE
Parsons Corporation
PenFed Credit Union

Peoplescout in Partnership with McKesson Corp
Perspecta
Prince George's County Department of Corrections
PRISM Inc.
Rainier Cyber
Raytheon IIS
Ridgeline International
Sabre Systems, Inc.
SBG Technology Solutions
SOS International LLC
Succession Planning for Railroads (SPRING)
The Excalibur Group
Transportation Security Administration
Trescal
Triple Canopy (A Constellis Company)
U.S. Customs and Border Protection
U.S. Department of Commerce
United Rentals, INC.
United States Capitol Police
VSE

SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

Citizen Soldier For Life
Department of Employment Services
Dog Tag Inc.
Military OneSource
Psych Armor Institute
State of Maryland
U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs

The mission of The American Legion's National Veterans Employment & Education Commission is to take actions that affect the economic wellbeing of veterans, including issues relating to veterans' education, employment, home loans, vocational rehabilitation, homelessness, and small business

TOPIC 5: VETERAN HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

Housing Crisis for Vets Began With Long-ago Jolt 1971 Quake Led to Removal of Hundreds from West L.A. VA Site

When Del Gill arrived at the sprawling West Los Angeles Veterans Affairs campus in 2016, federal officials had just unveiled a master plan for transforming dozens of disused historic buildings into permanent housing for veterans like him.

Four years later, the ex-Marine still lives in a tent. "I don't see any ground being lifted or bricks getting stacked," Gill said, nodding over the fence from San Vicente Boulevard, where he and other homeless veterans bed down every night. "All these old buildings ... they just let them sit vacant."

That may soon change. This summer, developers plan to gut Building 207, a midcentury Mission Revival-style ward of weathered stucco and terra cotta tile, transforming the former hospital into 59 units of permanent housing for homeless veterans that will one day anchor an enclave of 1,800.

Yet few Angelenos remember that less than 50 years ago, 2,800 veterans lived on the campus. The land was used primarily as housing from 1888 until 1972, when the federal government evacuated residents and closed what was then the largest veterans housing development in the country.

If Building 207 is finished on schedule, it will end half a century of decay set off by the 10-second Sylmar earthquake.

"We all own this land, it's all dedicated [to] veterans," Mayor Eric Garcetti said of the campus, where officials have tried and failed to rebuild housing ever since. "People are encamped all around this property, and then there's all these acres inside -- if we can't solve it here, we won't be able to solve it anywhere."

The multimillion-dollar rehabilitation of Building 207 will be a test case for the West L.A. Veterans Collective, a partnership among the veterans-services nonprofit U.S. Vets, Century Housing and the developer Thomas Safran & Associates, which contracted to produce the bulk of the community mandated by the plan.

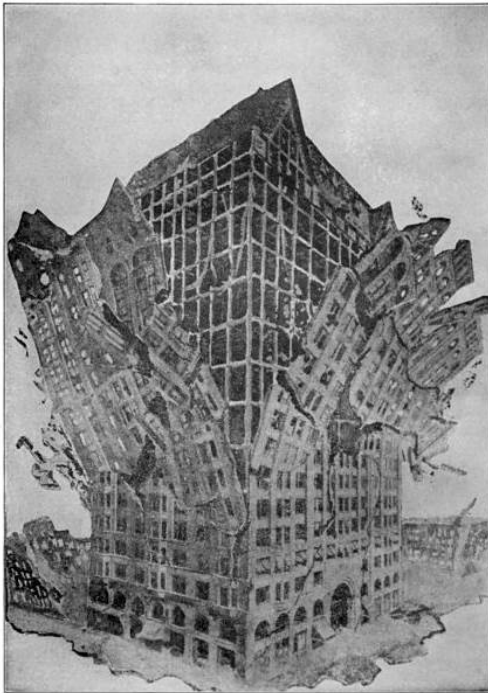
Proposed names such as Arroyo Pacific and Vetwood Village and Stearns Baker Park nod to the site's storied past. But its more recent history -- the story of how Building 207 and so many others came to be vacant -- is quietly left out.

"We decided early on that we were going to start from today and go forward," U.S. Vets Chief Executive Stephen Peck said. "We know we know how to do this, that we can create a cohesive campus. We're creating a real community."

The community was a hard-won victory for homeless veterans, who sued the VA in 2011 over mismanagement of the land.

But the sudden mass eviction, more than any other policy or event, is what seeded the rot on the campus. It set the stage for the controversial leases and decades of neglect at the heart of the 2011 suit. The removal, its aftermath and the seismic events that led up to it continue to shape the lives of the nearly 4,000 homeless veterans living in Los Angeles today.

The West L.A. VA's housing crisis began 42 seconds after 6 a.m. on Feb. 9, 1971, when a 6.5 temblor jolted the slumbering foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains.



The Sylmar earthquake killed 58 people. Forty-nine of them died at the Sylmar VA. Witnesses later told members of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs that two hospital buildings collapsed "in a cloud of dust" while the ground was still shaking.

"Just collapsed instantaneously?" Rep. Roman Pucinski (D-Ill.) asked, according to congressional transcripts.

"Instantaneously," San Fernando engineering officer Clifford Lemear said.

"There was no forewarning?" "None whatsoever," Lemear said.

Members of the committee summoned UC Berkeley professor Bruce Bolt and other seismic experts to testify at a special hearing convened in Los Angeles nine days after the earthquake. Lawmakers wanted to know how the disaster had happened, and how

many more of their buildings might be at risk.

Records show federal officials were initially optimistic about California VA facilities, including the L.A.-area hospitals where survivors were evacuated. The buildings that collapsed in Sylmar had been erected in 1925 -- eight years before early seismic engineering codes were introduced across the state -- while many others had more modern infrastructure.

But VA engineers had assessed the failed buildings just three months before the earthquake and declared them to be safe.

The ultra-modern Olive View Hospital, not far from the Sylmar VA, had also suffered significant damage despite being built to the most recent codes. Congress was adamant that the VA take every precaution to avoid future seismic failures, no matter the cost.

"We have to make a tough decision. We either have to abandon those facilities, build new ones or spend the [money] to restructure them," Pucinski said at the L.A. subcommittee hearing. "We have a lot of hospitals and a lot of veterans and staff who, in the wake of this tragedy, must be protected.... Any way you look, it's going to cost money."

Earthquake engineering was "still an art, not yet a science," expert Henry Degenkolb told the panel. Studies should be conducted with all possible speed, but it was ultimately impossible to know the extent of the vulnerabilities, or how costly they might be to fix.

Congress appropriated millions for the seismic studies, which were completed by private contractors in the months that followed. But the results were not made public.

Instead, records show that on the morning of Jan. 14, 1972, top VA officials converged on the West L.A. campus, where Deputy Administrator Fred Rhodes declared 30 of its 236 buildings uninhabitable and ordered 1,460 residents evacuated by the end of February.

The homes were not themselves unsafe. But the VA had decided to convert them into medical wards while a new "earthquake-proof" hospital was built.

"This has been a very traumatic situation for all of us," J.J. Cox, the VA's Southern California Regional Medical District director, told The Times in 1972. "Had we been able to extend the time limit, we would have done it, but we had to make the moves as rapidly as possible."

At the time, residents were mostly elderly -- a man interviewed in 1970 said he'd fought in the Spanish-American War -- but a growing number were in their teens and early 20s. Reports indicate that by the time the housing units were evacuated, they were already home to hundreds of Vietnam veterans.

Inside a decade, such men would be L.A.'s largest homeless demographic.

Records show the VA spent more than \$8 million transforming former housing into medical facilities like Building 207, the first of which opened that May. All other repairs were deemed "not economically feasible" by the federal government. That decision was reaffirmed a year later, during an appropriations hearing in 1973.

"What this committee wants is specific assurance that if we are going to spend money out of this VA budget that it is not going to be jeopardized," Rep. Joseph McDade (R-Pa.) said. "You have already had to close a series of existing buildings. We don't want to put additional money in and find out that it is going to be good money after bad."

The first disputed leases followed within weeks.

In May 1973, the L.A. City Council opened discussions to annex portions of the campus they expected the federal government to declare excess. Reports from the time show the Brentwood School was already courting its controversial lease.

That same year, UCLA received a donation for its Jackie Robinson Stadium. A plot in Westwood was tentatively selected, but when homeowners pushed back in 1976, the university turned to "surplus" land on the VA campus instead.



The \$83.7-million Wadsworth Hospital opened in March 1977, making the hastily converted medical wards redundant just five years after veterans were evicted. The same buildings that had housed "old soldiers" for decades were leased off or abandoned while hundreds of young veterans slept on the street.

The decade that followed saw L.A. overwhelmed by homelessness. Official estimates from the mid-1980s put L.A.'s unhoused population at 30,000 to 50,000 -- though such estimates are considered far less reliable than those made today. At the time, a third were believed to be veterans.

On the Westside, that percentage was closer to half. In Venice alone, UCLA researchers estimated that 33% of the homeless population had served in Vietnam.

Still, plans to restore housing on the vast VA campus foundered.

"We knew that wherever there were homeless, there are going to be veterans," VA social worker Margaret Ronan told The Times in 1988. Yet months earlier, neighbors had scuttled a city plan to house veterans in city-owned trailers on the site, which had fewer than 300 shelter beds. U.S. Sen. Alan Cranston (D-Calif.) wrote to demand a survey of vacant buildings that might be converted to housing, but little was done.

Instead, by the early '90s, huge encampments of homeless veterans emerged on the edge of the land. Veterans like Gill still live there today.

Outside experts were cautiously optimistic the new West L.A. development could at last reverse that trend.

"Affordable housing is a huge deal and there's not a lot of it, particularly for veterans," said Kathryn Monet, chief executive of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans.

"We're pleased to see that the VA is starting to prioritize that."

Still, there are no current estimates of what the community will cost, or who will ultimately pay for it.

"With a recently approved campus plan, we are currently working to assess full scope of infrastructure, historic preservation and other costs across the campus -- and also the ways that we can partner with VA, government and our community to achieve this vision," said Peck, the U.S. Vets CEO.

But history weighed heavily on the San Vicente Boulevard encampment.

"Wasn't this land given to veterans?" Gill asked. "I'd love to see them give us back the VA."

TOPIC 6: SMALL BUSINESS

Small businesses owned or run by disabled veterans may have been cheated out of hundreds of millions of dollars in Defense Department contracts by unscrupulous firms who were ineligible for the awards, the Pentagon's Inspector General reported Thursday.

The IG's audit found that the DoD "awarded \$876.8 million in contracts to ineligible contractors and did not implement procedures to ensure compliance with the Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business (SDVOSB) subcontracting requirements after the contracts were awarded. "At least 16 of the 29 contractors reviewed in the report who received business from the DoD on the basis that they met the disabled veteran requirements were found to be ineligible, the IG's office said.



Unless the DoD conducts better oversight, "service-disabled veterans may be in jeopardy of not receiving contract awards intended for them, and the DoD will be at risk of misreporting the amounts for SDVOSB participation," the 29-page report states. The IG's report followed on warnings in a Government Accountability Office report last November that some firms seeking business with the DoD were setting up shell companies with "opaque ownership structures that may conceal who owns, controls, or benefits from the company. "We identified fraud and national security risks to DoD from opaque ownership such as ineligible contractors receiving contracts and foreign firms receiving sensitive information through U.S.-based companies," the GAO's report said.

Under an executive order, the DoD and all government agencies have been directed to boost opportunities for service-disabled veteran businesses to get contracts, with a goal of having at least 3% of all federal contracting dollars go to firms owned by disabled veterans. The rules require that the SDVOSB be at least 51%-owned by one or more service-disabled veterans, and one or more service-disabled veterans must be in control of the management and daily business operations of the business.

However, the IG's report found that the DoD had been awarding contracts intended for disabled veterans to some contractors who "did not have a service-disabled veteran as the owner and highest ranking officer in the company or whose publicly available information and contracting documentation did not support that they met the requirements for SDVOSB status." In addition, the contracting personnel at the DoD "did not perform the oversight necessary to verify compliance with the SDVOSB subcontracting requirements," the report said.



It did not name any of the questionable firms but cited the example of one identified only as "Contractor A," who had received a \$5 million SDVOSB contract based on the contractor's "self-representation" as a disabled veteran-owned business.

The report said that "we were unable to confirm" with the Department of Veterans Affairs that the individual named as Contractor

A's president was actually a service-disabled veteran. The report also cited the case of "Contractor B," who had received three SDVOSB contracts worth \$209.6 million. "However, we determined that evidence did not exist to support that a service-disabled veteran was the majority owner and

highest ranking officer or in control of the company," the IG's report said. Only one member of Contractor B's business was a service-disabled veteran, and that person "lived over 2,000 miles away from the contractor's location," according to the report.

It recommended that the Office of Small Business Programs (OSBP) at the DoD require contractors to submit valid documentation to support their SDVOSB status before contracts are awarded, and perform periodic reviews to verify eligibility.

In response to the report, OSBP Acting Director J. Scott Baum disagreed with the findings and declined to address the recommendations, the IG's office said. In addition, Baum "stated that his office was not primarily responsible for procurement policy or contract operations," according to the report. In his memo to the IG's office, Baum said it is the Small Business Administration, and not his office, that is "responsible for determining eligibility and ensuring compliance" with the SDVOSB rules.

TOPIC 7: EDUCATION

Ashford University announced Tuesday that the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) gave its approval to continue to receive benefits under the GI Bill. The decision is retroactive to July 1, 2019.



The decision follows the for-profit online university's drawn-out battle to remain eligible for GI Bill funding after the state of Iowa moved to pull its approval in 2016. It also comes as Ashford attempts to separate as an independent nonprofit from owner Zovio, an ed tech company formerly known as Bridgepoint Education.

The VA is acting in place of the California State Approving Agency for Veterans Education after it pulled the agency's oversight of military education benefits in September. That move followed a thorny debate between the two groups about how to supervise education providers that receive GI Bill funds, particularly for-profit colleges.

Ashford factored heavily into the dispute. In 2017, California's attorney general announced he was suing Ashford and its parent company, saying they misled students — allegations Zovio denies. State regulators said they wouldn't decide on Ashford's application for veteran benefits while the lawsuit was underway, adding that the VA pushed the state agency to approve Ashford to receive the funds.

Ashford has retained the ability to offer veteran benefits to students, despite the debate over which state will approve them, Vickie Schray, Zovio's executive vice president and chief external affairs officer, told Education Dive in an interview Tuesday. The university voluntarily suspended new enrollments in the programs between November 2017 and February 2018, she said.

In its latest decision, the VA approved all but 20 of Ashford's programs for GI Bill eligibility. The company said in a press release that the unapproved programs "do not represent a significant number of students" and will not have a "material impact" on its total enrollment. Schray wouldn't confirm to Education Dive what those programs were, saying they hadn't been finalized.

A representative from the California Department of Veterans Affairs said they couldn't comment on the situation because they are no longer the approving agency for the state.

Ashford is the 13th-largest recipient of VA funds, Politico reported. Of the 34,710 students Ashford enrolled in the fall of 2018, 11% used VA benefits.

The dispute over Ashford's access to GI Bill funds dates to 2016, when the Iowa Department of Education said the state would no longer approve the university's programs because it was closing a campus there. It was approved through Arizona before the VA's latest decision, Schray said.

For-profit colleges have been criticized for their focus on recruiting veterans, who can use their GI Bill benefits to cover tuition costs. Those benefits aren't included in the rule barring for-profit schools from receiving more than 90% of their revenue from federal aid. A 2016 analysis showed that if GI Bill benefits were included in the 90/10 calculation, the number of colleges getting at least 90% of their revenue from federal education programs would skyrocket from 17 to almost 200.

In its announcement Tuesday, Ashford said it would remain below that ratio even if GI Bill benefits and the U.S. Department of Defense's Tuition Assistance program funds were considered. Still, a 2018 audit from the VA's Office of the Inspector General highlighted concerns with how education benefits under the Post-9/11 GI Bill — the 2008 expansion of the program — are administered across states and institutions. In a sample of 175 programs green-lighted by seven state approving agencies, the office found that 35 had unsupported or improper approvals, missing or delayed reporting, or "potentially erroneous, deceptive, or misleading marketing."

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Week Ending: 2/21/20
