

NATIONAL VETERANS EMPLOYMENT & EDUCATION COMMISSION

TOPIC 1: ECONOMY

The weekly jobless claims report from the Labor Department on Thursday, the most timely data on the economy's health, also showed nearly 30 million people were on unemployment benefits at the end of August, laying bare both the continuing economic and human devastation six months after the COVID-19 pandemic started in the United States.

The Federal Reserve on Wednesday vowed to keep interest rates near zero for a long time, noting that the coronavirus "will continue to weigh on economic activity" in the near term and "poses considerable risks to the economic outlook over the medium term." Fed Chair Jerome Powell said more fiscal support was likely to be needed for the economy.

"With nearly 30 million people unemployed and the ongoing failure of politicians to deliver additional needed fiscal stimulus, the climb out of the pandemic downturn is likely to be slower and more damaging to long-term growth than it should have been," said Ron Temple, head of U.S. equity at Lazard Asset Management in New York.

Initial claims for state unemployment benefits fell 33,000 to a seasonally adjusted 860,000 for the week ended Sept. 12. Data for the prior week was revised to show 9,000 more applications received than previously reported.

Unadjusted claims dropped 75,974 to 790,021 last week. Economists prefer the unadjusted claims number given earlier difficulties adjusting the claims data for seasonal fluctuations because of the economic shock caused by the coronavirus crisis.

A total 658,737 applications were received for the government-funded pandemic unemployment assistance last week. The PUA is for the self-employed, gig workers and others who do not qualify for the regular state unemployment programs. Altogether, 1.45 million people filed claims last week.

The claims report also showed the number of people receiving benefits after an initial week of aid declined 916,000 to 12.628 million in the week ending Sept. 5. Economists attributed the drop in the so-called continuing claims to people exhausting their eligibility for benefits, which are limited to 26 weeks in most states.

The number of people on a government-funded program that provides up to 13 additional weeks of benefits to individuals who have exhausted their regular unemployment compensation increased 104,683 to 1.5 million in the week ending Aug. 29.



Veterans wait for unemployment assistance at Career Center in Las Vegas

A third report from the Philadelphia Fed on Thursday showed factory activity in the mid-Atlantic region moderating in September, though manufacturers remained optimistic about growth over the next six months. Reports this week showed a slowdown in retail sales and production at factories in August.

U.S. stocks were trading lower. The dollar slipped against a basket of currencies. U.S. Treasury prices rose.

After declining from a record 6.867 million at the end of March, as businesses reopened after being shuttered to stem the spread of the coronavirus, claims have flattened, with layoffs spilling over to industries not initially impacted by the mandated closures.

A \$600 weekly unemployment benefits supplement ended in July and was replaced with a \$300 weekly subsidy, which is not available in all states and is expected to run out of funding this month. A program to help businesses with wages lapsed in August, while \$25 billion in government assistance for airline payrolls expires this month.

Last week's claims covered the period during which the government surveyed businesses for the nonfarm payrolls component of September's employment report.

The economy added 1.371 million jobs in August and has recouped 10.6 million of the 22.2 million jobs lost at the depth of the coronavirus crisis.

Unemployment has disproportionately affected low-wage workers, who are typically renters, limiting the hit from the pandemic on the housing market.

A separate report from the Commerce Department on Thursday showed single-family homebuilding, which accounts for the largest share of the housing market, increased 4.1% to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 1.021 million units in August.

Further gains are likely, with building permits for single-family housing units accelerating 6.0% to a rate of 1.036 million units, the highest since May 2007. A 22.7% tumble in starts for the volatile multi-family housing segment, however, led to a 5.1% drop in overall homebuilding to a rate of 1.416 million units last month.

The housing market is being fueled by record low interest rates and a pandemic-fueled migration to suburbs and low-density areas.

[Reported by John Kamin]

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		
	Aug 2019	Aug 2020	Aug 2019	Aug 2020	Aug 2019	Aug 2020	
Unemployed	323	560	289	476	34	84	
Unemployment rate	3.5	6.6	3.6	6.1	3.2	8.2	

The national unemployment rate is 10.2 percent (July 2020). Gulf War II veterans' unemployment rate is 7.0 percent.ⁱ Currently, the unemployment rate for Gulf War II women veterans is 4.5 percent (Down from 7.9 percent in July).

In August 2020, the veteran unemployment rate is 6.6%, down from 7.9% last month and 8.6% two months ago. The comparable non-veteran unemployment rate was 8.4% in August and 10.2% in July

TOPIC 2: CONFERENCE CALLS

On Saturday, September 12, 2020 the National Veterans Employment & Education Division participated at the Iowa American Legion Leadership Conference. Discussed out work on Risk Based Surveys and meaningful oversight of GI Bill Approved institutions. Reviewed the Education Center site on the Legion website and discussed Legion efforts to expand membership among young vets through campus posts.

On Monday September 14, 2020 the National Veterans Employment and Education Division had a discussion with the National Veterans Small Business Coalition regarding the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations' hearing. NVSBC has been working with the Coalition for Government Procurement prepare their testimony from the industry's perspective.

On Monday September 14, 2020 the National Veterans Employment and Education Division had conversation with NAVPA leadership on October virtual conference and moderating the policy panel. Also discussion with SVAC on 4625 and other pending legislation. Participated in monthly NASAA EB leadership briefing on the Risk Based Survey Project.

On Monday September 14, 2020 the National Veterans Employment and Education Division led the first virtual meeting of the George W. Bush National Task Force Policy Workgroup. Discussed DOD ending SAT/ACT tests at testing centers, challenges of payroll tax refunds for the military and learning in the Higher Education COVID environment.

On Tuesday, September 15, 2020 the National Veterans Employment & Education Division participated in a conference call with University of Chicago Veterans Affairs Officer Terrell on the Veterans Education Life Cycle (VELC) that they utilize in Illinois. Further discussed how this model could be used in higher education, particularly at elite institutions such as Dartmouth to recruit and support veterans.

On Tuesday, September 15, 2020 the National Veterans Employment & Education Division participated in a four corners conference call with the House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees. The call focused on bipartisan agreement over H.R 4625, the Protect the GI Bill Act, as well as well as additional appropriations for VA Education Service IT needs.

On Tuesday, September 15, 2020 the National Veterans Employment & Education Division talked with RBS Project Manager Woodall on pilot SAA Issues. Also conversation with Ed Service Deputy Director James Ruddell on RBS project and legislative issues surrounding GI Bill.

On Wednesday September 16, 2020 the National Veterans Employment and Education Division attended the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations will hold a hearing entitled "Modernizing VA's Medical Supply Chain: Lessons Learned from the Pandemic." The American Legion has been studying root causes of the shortages VA experienced during the onset of the Pandemic as well as the dependencies in VA's medical supply chain. How VA purchases their medical supplies directly affects veteran patients.

On Thursday, September 17, 2020 the National Veterans Employment & Education Division attended a closed-holds briefing with VA Education Service to discuss their new plans for a "Digital GI Bill" upgrade. This project would streamline 18 separate legacy IT systems into a modern framework allowing touchpoint user access for GI Bill benefits.

TOPIC 3: TRACKING LEGISLATION

GI Bill of Rights Equity Commission Act: Establish the independent National Commission on GI Bill Equity to identify veterans of World War II who were denied the full effect of their GI Bill benefits because of contemporaneous local, State, and Federal Government policies that discriminated against African Americans.

(Tracked by [John Kamin](#))

[Resolution: None on file, presenting for review at Fall NEC.](#)

Status: Currently on hold, has not been introduced

HR 6800, the Heroes Act: Allows VA to provide transport and purchase food, shelter, phones, clothing, blankets and toiletry items for homeless veterans; Authorizes VA to set up temporary encampments on the grounds of VA Medical Centers to allow homeless veterans to shelter on VA parking lots temporarily; Allows VA to provide reimbursements to social service providers receiving grants for the costs of services for minor children.

(Tracked by [Davy Leghorn](#))

[Resolution No. 324: Support Funding for Homeless Veterans](#)

HR 7445: To amend title 38, United States Code, to expand eligibility for home loans from the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to certain members of the reserve components of the Armed Forces.

This bill was submitted for the July 23, 2020 testimony.

[Resolution No. 329: Support Home Loan Guaranty Program](#)

HR 1615: The American Legion supports legislation that would streamline and improve the verification process for veteran-owned small businesses and veteran-owned small businesses.

[Resolution No. 155: Support Verification Improvements for Veterans' Business](#)

Passed at the 2016 National Convention.

(Tracked by Davy Leghorn)

HR 2224: To direct the Secretary of Labor to prioritize services to homeless veterans with dependent children in carrying out homeless veterans' reintegration programs and for other purposes.

(Tracked by Ariel De Jesus/John Kamin)

[Resolution No. 326: Support Funding for Additional Housing for Homeless Veterans with Families](#)

S. 2594: To amend title 5, United States Code, to modify specific requirements concerning service and retirement for veterans' Preference for federal hiring.

(Tracked by Ariel De Jesus)

[Resolution No. 317: Enforcing Veterans' Preference Hiring Practices in Federal Civil Service](#)

HR 1196, Jobs for Veterans Act of 2019: This bill allows an increased work opportunity tax credit for employers who hire veterans who have been certified as discharged or released from active duty in the Armed Forces after September 11, 2001, and who begin working for the employer after December 31, 2019, and before January 1, 2024. This increased credit is in addition to any work opportunity tax credit allowed to a veteran with a service-connected disability.

(Tracked by Ariel De Jesus/John Kamin)

[Resolution No. 354: Work Opportunity Tax Credit Program](#)

HR 7010, Paycheck Protection Program Flexibility Act of 2020: This bill significantly changes the terms of the PPP loans to be more advantageous to small businesses. Including more flexibility in applying the loan to other expenses besides payroll and benefits and extending the time frame for expending the loan.

(Tracked by Davy Leghorn)

HR 4625: To require education programs to be approved by the VA to abide by the Principles of Excellence to include a ban on deceptive or misleading recruiting, clear information about total costs and program requirements, accommodation for deployments, ensuring a point of contact for veterans, and not being under a punitive action by an accreditor.

(Tracked by John Kamin)

[Resolution No. 318: Ensuring the Quality of Servicemember and Veteran Student's Education at Institutions of Higher Education](#)

HR 6957: To direct the Secretaries of Defense and Veterans Affairs to treat a period of full-time National Guard duty, performed in response to the national emergency declared on March 13, 2020, by the President concerning COVID-19, as not shorter than 90 days.

(Tracked by John Kamin)

Currently studying for appropriate resolution.

HR 4941 Veteran Employment Transition Act” or the “VET Act” was sponsored by Representative Andy Kim. The last action on the bill was in the House on 12/02/2019; it was referred to the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity. The bill's goal is to improve the Transition Assistance Program. The bill would allow certain veterans' service organizations to contact veterans regarding benefits and to better inform veterans of employment opportunities. The Service

groups would inform veterans of the benefits and employment opportunities with the Federal, State, and local governments. The groups inform veterans of events for in the area.

(Tracked by Ariel De Jesus) **A letter of Support was sent**

[Resolution No. 70: Improve Transition Assistance Program](#)

H.R.7003 is a bill sponsored by Rep. Takano, Mark D-CA-41 and was introduced 05/22/2020. The bill would authorize a pilot program in the Department of Defense to enhance efforts to provide job placement assistance and related employment services directly to members of the National Guard, Reserves, and veterans of the Armed Forces. The last action on the bill was 05/22/2020 and referred to the Committee on Armed Services.

(Tracked by Raymond Lorminey/Ariel De Jesus)

[Resolution No. 81: Transition Assistance Program Employment Workshops for National Guard and Reserve Members](#)

Coronavirus Emergency Borrower Defense (E-BD) Act: to require the Department of Education to grant full student loan discharges to three specific emergency categories of defrauded borrowers—specifically borrowers covered by:

- (1) Department of Education findings against Corinthian.
- (2) Department of Education findings against ITT Tech; and
- (3) State attorneys general group discharge applications made before the date of enactment.

(Tracked by John Kamin)

[Resolution No. 82: Preserve Veteran and Servicemember Rights to Gainful Employment and Borrower Defense Protections](#)

HR 7111: Veterans Economic Recovery Act of 2020: Require the Secretary of VA to carry out a rapid retraining program that provides eligible veterans up to 12 months of retraining assistance for in-demand occupations. These 12 months of benefits would be equivalent to payments made to students and schools through the Post 9/11 GI Bill.

(Tracked by John Kamin)

This bill was submitted for the July 23, 2020 testimony.

[Resolution No. 316: Support Employment of Veterans in the Public and Private Workforce](#)

Homeless Veteran Coronavirus Response Act: The bill allows VA to use existing funds for a broader range of services; authorizes the Department to collaborate with outside organizations to facilitate shelters on its properties; loosens restrictions on Grant and Per Diem (GPD) payments, and requires VA to ensure veterans participating in VA homeless programs have access to VA telehealth services.

(Tracked by Teresa Lewis)

[Resolution No. 326: Support Funding for Additional Housing for Homeless Veterans with Families](#)

HR 4920, Department of Veterans Affairs Contracting Preference Consistency Act of 2020: is a bill that would allow AbilityOne companies to keep their preferential treatment at the Department of Veteran Affairs after 2016 with some compromises. The Senate initially sent it back to the House after it was passed for changes. Those changes have been reconciled and the bill cleared its last hurdle before it is sent to the White House.

Draft Bill: Home loan benefits for National Guard to amend title 38, United States Code, to expand eligibility for home loans from the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to certain members of the reserve components of the Armed Forces.

(Tracked by John Kamin)

We submitted written testimony for the July 23, 2020 hearing.

[Resolution No. 329: Support Home Loan Guaranty Program](#)

Draft Bill: JSF - To amend title 38, United States Code, to clarify the scope of procedural rights of members of the uniformed services concerning their employment and reemployment rights, and for other purposes.

(Tracked by Davy Leghorn)

We submitted written testimony for the July 23, 2020 hearing.

Draft Bill: USERRA Protections for State Active Duty - To amend title 38, United States Code, to extend particular employment and reemployment rights to members of the National Guard who perform State active duty. Submitted written testimony to the Legislative Division.

(Tracked by Ariel De Jesus)

We submitted written testimony for the July 23, 2020 hearing.

[Resolution No. 315: Support Employment and Reemployment Rights of National Guard and Reservists Returning from Deployment](#)

Draft Bill: Veterans Educational Assistance Transparency and Accountability Improvement Act, improves the GI. Bill Comparison Tool and ensures veterans, servicemembers, and their families are better informed when choosing what educational institution is best for them.

A letter of Support was Sent

[Resolution No. 327: Support Further Assessment and Evaluation of Institutions of Higher Learning to Enable Veterans to Make Informed Education Choices](#)

Draft Bill: Reducing Veteran Homelessness Act of 2020: would require VA contract out vacant HUD-VASH case worker positions to local, qualified community providers. and GPD programs so that more homeless veterans can access housing through them.

(Tracked by John Kamin)

[Resolution No. 326: Support Funding for Additional Housing for Homeless Veterans with Families](#)

TOPIC 4: EMPLOYMENT

It's safe to say most veterans leaving military service will be entering the civilian job market for the first time as adults. While many are given weeks of training, as well as access to hundreds of public and private nonprofit programs to show them how to get that first big job, there are many who need career advice long after service ends.

After all, at some point, even an adult who is likely older than most people in their position will need to switch jobs, take a promotion or



otherwise advance their career. With less experience in the civilian world than their peers, veterans may not know exactly how to proceed. Having a mentor is the best way to get that kind of advice, but those who don't have one will still likely succeed. They just need to remember to avoid a few key things, many of which may sound familiar.

1. Complacency

It's easy to get bogged down in work. We all have deadlines to meet, projects to finish and teams that require our contribution. But if we only ever keep serving in that role and never grow as a professional or employee, we will soon find our skills dated or worse: obsolete.

One of the most important things to do to keep a resume fresh is being up-to-date on the trends, methods and skills of our craft, whatever they may be. This is the added value an employee can bring to any company. Keep those skills fresh, be knowledgeable and never be resistant to change -- it's coming whether you're ready or not.

2. Lack of Self-Promotion

The military is a meritocracy (for the most part). Those who do the time in service with the time in grade, get applicable education and training, and pass the test are likely to be promoted ahead of their peers. It doesn't work that way in the civilian world. In the rest of the world, the squeaky wheel gets the grease. For anyone uncomfortable with this, there's still hope: a wingman.

Find a like-minded co-worker to talk you up to colleagues and other industry professionals and agree to do the same for them. The news is more trustworthy if it comes from someone else anyway. This method also leads to building strong, trusted relationships in an industry, some that could pay off further down the line. It also keeps you from overselling yourself because you want something badly.

3. Inflated Ego

Even Tesla's board has tried to remove Elon Musk. No matter what job someone holds, in any industry, they are part of a team. No single member of a team is greater than the sum of its parts. Once someone stops being part of that team, especially in bigger organizations, they may need to be replaced, no matter how important.

4. Excessive Negativity

Everyone gets down on their job once in a while, but it's important to remember that mindset can affect an entire group of employees. Constant complaining can be draining to everyone. Spreading negativity about work or a project can lower the overall morale for everyone -- and people tend to remember excessively negative people.

5. Overpromising and Under-Delivering

It's important to be realistic with yourself and colleagues about your ability to deliver what you promise. It's equally important to make the deadlines set for projects. While anyone would be driven to make the most of the tasks set for them, to be seen as hardworking and dedicated to a cause, not making those deadlines and promises can have disastrous results.

No one looks good when they fail to meet expectations. Moreover, you put increased pressure and stress on yourself to perform at a level you may not be able to maintain. It's far better to set realistic goals and deliver quality work on time.

6. Being the Jack-of-All-Trades

Being a generalist is no longer as valued as being the expert in today's civilian workforce. It is also extremely limiting for an employee once the value of that generalization fades away. Employers today are looking for skilled workers who know their fields and want to excel as an important part of a team. Having someone on the team who can't perform at the same expert level as other members of the team is no longer the "glue that keeps everyone together." It can be a real hindrance, one that will be replaced in a hurry.

7. Making Excuses

We have all met this person. No matter what goes wrong, it was never really *their fault*. There are countless books and seminars about owning one's mistakes, and this is why. Once you're "that person," you're that person for a long, long time. Maybe forever.

While veterans bring a wealth of knowledge and attributes to any company or organization that hires them, it is imperative that they are adequately prepared to deal with the change of military to civilian employment. The American Legion will continue to host virtual and in person workshops and career fairs.

Resolution No. 100: Accountability of the Department of Defense's Transition Assistance Program (TAP)

[Reported by Ariel De Jesus]

TOPIC 4b: EMPLOYMENT

Nearly 800 jobseekers attended a virtual career fair presented Sept. 15 by The American Legion Department of Texas, the Texas Veterans Commission and the Texas Workforce Commission. The free event — the first virtual career fair presented by The American Legion — helped job-seeking veterans, transitioning servicemembers, National Guardsmen, reservists and military family members link to 226 companies seeking to fill job vacancies.

While focused on Texas, the event drew attendees from other states, as well as veterans and transitioning servicemembers from Germany and Italy.

In an introductory video, American Legion National Commander James "Bill" Oxford thanked the veterans for their service and wished them luck in the job hunt.

"We're here to serve you and help you achieve your career aspirations," Oxford said.

Bob Gear, director of the Texas Veterans Leadership Program, said the successful event was "a tremendous partnership between The American Legion, military installations in Texas, the Texas Veterans Commission and the Texas Workforce Commission."

"The commitment and dedication in providing a quality virtual job fair was evident by having over 220 employers and over 780 job seekers participate in the event," Gear said.

"The real success is that our veterans have another great opportunity for meaningful employment as well as companies hiring that one veteran (to numerous veterans) who will have a lasting impact on their businesses," said Dan Sehafer, chairman of The American Legion Veterans Employment & Education Commission. "From the GI Bill and The Legion Act to The System Worth Saving and

now this, we continue to wholeheartedly support and fight for the needs of our fellow veteran brothers and sisters as well as their families."

[Reported by Media Relations]

TOPIC 5: VETERAN HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS



On September 16th, Republican Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy and Representative Mike Levin (CA-49) introduced the "Reducing Veteran Homelessness Act of 2020", which would increase homeless veteran to HUD-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program vouchers and supportive services that they deserve.

"For generations, our veterans have sacrificed immensely to guarantee the safety of the United States at home and abroad," said McCarthy. "Because of their service, our country remains a world leader and beacon of hope across the globe. When our service members leave the military, it is our responsibility to help them in their transition to civilian life, especially for those who fall on hard times."

The Reducing Veteran Homelessness Act would require three steps to ensure that homeless veterans receive the housing vouchers and supportive services that they deserve:

1. Require the VA to contract out vacant HUD-VASH case worker positions to local, qualified community providers.
2. Increase the Per Diem payments that community participants in the Grant and Per Diem (GPD) program may receive for each homeless veteran that they house.
3. Allow Grant and Per Diem (GPD) program community participants to use GPD funding to gain access to their local Homeless Management Information System (HMIS).

On July 31, 2020, the VA reported to Congress that 19,127 of the total 100,570 HUD-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) permanent housing vouchers that have already been allocated nationwide are not currently in use, meaning that approximately 20 percent of HUD-VASH vouchers for homeless veterans are going to waste.

There is a clear reason for this: the VA is unable to provide the wrap-around case management services needed for a homeless veteran to qualify for a HUD-VASH housing voucher due to widespread HUD-VASH case manager shortages. The VA also reported 641 HUD-VASH case manager vacancies, representing 16% of the total funded positions nationwide, on July 31.

The Reducing Veteran Homelessness Act would straighten this issue out by requiring VA Medical Centers to contract out HUD-VASH case management services in cases of long-term case manager position vacancies, which is at the center and underutilization of allocated housing vouchers.

Additionally, the Reducing Veteran Homelessness Act would help Grant and Per Diem (GPD) program community participants to better serve the homeless veterans that they temporarily house by taking into account the cost of housing homeless individuals in more expensive regions of the country and allowing them to more easily access their local HMIS system—thus better integrating their data with that of other community homelessness providers and potentially preserving precious homelessness resources by preventing overlapping services.

“These changes can make a world of difference for homeless veterans and their families, and I appreciate Minority Leader McCarthy's partnership on this legislation”, said Representative Mike Levin, Subcommittee Chair of the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity.

[Reported by John Kamin]

TOPIC 6: CAREER FAIRS

ALL IN-PERSON CAREER FAIRS SCHEDULED THROUGH SEPTEMBER HAVE BEEN CANCELLED, SUSPENDED, OR POSTPONED.

The American Legion is working on future virtual workshops and career fairs.

National, Department of Texas, and the Texas Veterans Commission hosted a Virtual Career Fair September 15th, 10 am – 4:00 pm CST.

Total number of veterans, servicemembers, and their families that participated were **778**. **226** employers & service providers were ready to assist and hire.

The American Legion, Department of Texas booth had **151** veterans stop in, while The American Legion Headquarter booth (Employment) had **353** visitors.

Newly discharged veterans claiming benefits totaled 13,977, an increase of 964 from the prior week.

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

[Reported by Ariel De Jesus]

TOPIC 7: SMALL BUSINESS

The Small Business Administration’s (SBA’s) October 15, 2020 elimination of the self-certification process for Women-Owned Small Businesses (WOSBs) and Economically Disadvantaged WOSBs (EDWOSBs) is rapidly approaching. This is extremely important because, Veteran and Service Disabled Veterans Small Business certification will follow suit.

How SBA transitions and streamlines Women Businesses will be the same way they will transition veteran certifications in-house. The American Legion has been advocating the streamlining of veteran small business certifications and centralizing them within the SBA through Resolution No. 155: Support Verification Improvements for Veterans' Business.

Similar to veteran small businesses, a WOSB is a small business (based on the applicable NAICS code determination) that is 51% directly and unconditionally owned and controlled by one or more women. An EDWOSB is a WOSB that meets the definition of economically disadvantaged, e.g., a WOSB whose ability to compete in the free enterprise system has been impaired due to diminished capital and credit opportunities as compared to others in the same or similar line of business.



Prior to this new rule, WOSBs and EDWOSBs had been able to self-certify (essentially on the honor system) that they met the applicable criteria. As a result of the SBA's new rule, firms hoping to compete for WOSB and EDWOSB set-aside contracts being awarded after October 15, 2020 will need to be formerly certified through one of three possible options: (1) the SBA's new, free online certification; (2) an approved third-party certification provider; or (3) a VA determination of Service-Disabled Veteran Owned or Veteran-Owned small business status and appropriate proof of women ownership and control.

To get started using the SBA's new certification process, contractors will need to have a Data Universal Number System (DUNS) number, register in the System for Award Management (SAM), and create a SBA Connect Account. The SBA also provides a checklist of documents that applicants will likely be required to submit during the certification process. These generally include: proof of citizenship and corporate formation documents such as Operating Agreements, Articles of Organization, Joint Venture Agreements, Articles of Incorporation, Bylaws, etc. Those seeking to qualify as economically disadvantaged will also have to submit certain personal financial information such as tax returns, W-2s, and detailed information about the value of your (and in some cases your spouse's) assets.

WOSBs and EDWOSBs that had previously self-certified and are currently performing under an awarded contract will not be immediately impacted, but will have to adhere to the new certification process when their prior self-certification lapses and/or the contract expires.

[Reported by Davy Leghorn]

TOPIC 8: EDUCATION

The Department of Veterans Affairs is eyeing yet another large-scale modernization effort — this time an overhaul to the legacy systems it uses to administer education and housing benefits under the GI bill.

The Department is asking Congress to reprogram some \$243 million from the funds it received under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act this past spring to overhaul its education IT services.

The goal, VA said, is to acquire and configure three commercial off-the-shelf packages. Those systems will allow VA to call, email, text and chat with GI bill beneficiaries, respond to questions from colleges and universities in real-time and grant VA immediate access to beneficiary records, Paul Lawrence, VA's undersecretary benefits, told House members Wednesday.



VA Under Secretary for Benefits Dr. Paul Lawrence

First, VA is seeking a customer relations management system.

“When veterans call us, we know everything about them on the phone,” Lawrence said.

The department will also purchase high-tech computing power, which will allow VBA to instantly calculate veteran educational benefits. And finally, VA will acquire enough data capacity so it has quick access to information about its

beneficiaries and colleges and universities.

VA estimates it will take between two-to-three years to complete the effort. The \$243 million reprogramming request is just one piece of the investment VA hopes Congress will make. The department doesn't yet have a total estimate of how much the entire “Digital GI Bill” modernization effort will cost.

Currently, the Veterans Benefits Administration administers \$12 billion in educational benefits to about 1 million beneficiaries using 23 different systems. The existing systems are unsustainable, Lawrence said.

A December 2019 visit from VA education services staff to Congress last year made that point known to lawmakers.

“VA claims processors use more than a dozen systems, — many of them decades old — toggling back and forth between screens, manually transferring data from one system to the next and taking and storing screen shots for audit purposes,” said Susie Lee (D-Nev.), chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Technology Modernization. “The inefficiency alone is problematic, not to mention the risk of error in data entry and the impact of those errors on our veterans.”

For VA, the new effort represents a shift from the way it's handled past IT projects, including the failed implementation of the Forever GI bill from 2018, which caused late housing payments to tens of thousands of veterans.

VA eventually pushed Forever GI bill implementation back a year and met deadlines back in December. Now, Lawrence says VBA is using the lessons it's learned from those efforts to inform the latest project.

For example, he said VBA will use the same governance structure to manage and oversee the Digital GI Bill project.

The Mitre Corporation, which VA hired last year to help implement outstanding provisions of the Forever GI Bill, will again serve as a program integrator to monitor the schedule, ensure the business requirements and resolve technical issues.

Third, VA will hire a systems integrator and software development contractor “with proven experience doing what we need done,” Lawrence said.

Congress is cautiously optimistic.

“It represents an opportunity to learn from the past and do things differently,” Jim Banks (R-Ind.), the subcommittee’s ranking member, said of the Digital GI Bill project. “It could be a break with the tired, old way of doing business that fails over and over but never seems to lose its hold over the federal government. We have seen it many times. An agency hires a traditional contractors, not a technology company, with notional requirements in hand. The contractors sells the agency a closed, proprietary system or worse builds one. The requirements fall apart and the scope creeps. The contractor burns millions of dollars just to keep the lights on. The project relaunches multiple times and eventually the agency lowers the goal posts or the whole effort gets canceled and we start all over again.”

Banks sees the current plan as a sign of a breakthrough for VA, if successful.

The modernization effort will also help VA more quickly respond to ever-evolving legislative changes to the GI Bill and adapt to the new environment the coronavirus pandemic has forced upon colleges and universities in recent months and for the foreseeable future, said Charmain Bogue, executive director for education services at VBA.

Congress in March passed new legislation into law, which gives VA the authority to continue administering GI Bill housing benefits to veterans during the pandemic, even though they may be taking college courses virtually.

“We had to adapt quickly,” Bogue said. “This highlighted some of the severe issues we had in our space. We thought this was the time to leverage the CARES Act funds in order to reprogram those funds to education services to modernize our systems. There’s a direct correlation to COVID-19 and what’s happening in our country right now.”

VBA has spent the past six-to-seven months working with the department’s chief information officer and Mitre to hash out an acquisition strategy.

From the \$243 million reprogramming request, \$198 million would go to VBA. VA’s Office of Information and Technology would receive the remaining \$45 million.

Jim Gfrerer, VA’s CIO, said the department’s IT investment board is mapping out what resources it will need to support the Digital GI Bill modernization.

“That has historically been a challenge,” he said. “In many cases the business will get the appropriated funding and IT will not, and that’s a problem.”

[Reported by John Kamin]

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Week Ending: 9/18/2020
