

U.S. House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

ONE HUNDRED FIFTEENTH CONGRESS

335 CANNON HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515

<http://veterans.house.gov>

October 23, 2018

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

We write to express concern about the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA's) processing delays for GI Bill tuition, fees, and housing allowances and to urge VA to communicate immediately and accurately to beneficiaries about the assistance available to those facing financial hardship as a result of the delays.

As you are aware, VA's recent efforts to improve information technology (IT) functionalities for GI Bill processing have consistently missed key deadlines. Despite VA's goal of implementing these IT functionalities prior to the beginning of the current academic year, VA remains unsuccessful in its implementation. As a result, beneficiaries are not only experiencing long delays in receiving their tuition, fees, and housing allowances but many are still waiting for these funds to arrive at all, several months into the start of the academic year. In addition, beneficiaries who are receiving their housing allowances are currently receiving incorrect amounts due to the IT implementation delay of updated housing allowances per the Harry W. Colmery Educational Assistance Act of 2017.

This has caused considerable confusion among schools and beneficiaries. This confusion has been compounded by VA's failure to communicate in a transparent manner with beneficiaries about what they can expect and how they can get help. Although VA has been diligent about updating this Committee about its progress, its communication with beneficiaries, who are the ones most in need of up-to-date information about their payments, has been severely lacking.

Most of VA's communication about these issues with beneficiaries has taken place via its Facebook page. While these posts reach tens of thousands of Facebook users, it's unclear how many actual GI Bill beneficiaries are seeing these posts. The posts also cannot take the place of directly reaching out to the beneficiaries of the more than 100,000 pending claims that are currently still being processed. In addition, when VA finally sent an email directly to beneficiaries on October 9, 2018, the email contained incorrect information about the fastest way that beneficiaries who are facing financial hardship can receive assistance; the email directed

beneficiaries to a website in cases of financial hardship, but on October 17, 2018, VA briefed Committee staff that beneficiaries who call are placed in the financial hardship queue quicker.

Such lack of coordination and communication is unacceptable as we have received requests for help from veterans who are facing school disenrollment because of delayed tuition payments, as well as those facing eviction and even homelessness due to delayed housing allowance payments. Although the Committee has been working with VA to get these individual cases processed immediately, we are concerned about the many beneficiaries who are facing similar circumstances but who have not managed to reach out to Congress or a veteran service organization for help. If VA had provided beneficiaries with the correct information on how they can get their claims processed immediately for financial hardship as soon as VA knew it was not going to be making payments on time, VA could have prevented these beneficiaries from being removed from school and facing the loss of their homes.

We therefore urge you to address beneficiaries directly on this matter and to issue up-to-date and accurate information on the payment delays and financial hardship assistance as soon as possible. We also urge you to provide this information not only directly to beneficiaries but also on the VA website in order to ensure transparency going forward. Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



TIM WALZ
Ranking Member



MARK TAKANO



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