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**STATEMENT OF
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SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin and Members of the Subcommittee:

DAV (Disabled American Veterans) has a mission that includes the principle that this nation's first duty to veterans is the rehabilitation and welfare of its wartime disabled. This principle envisions vocational rehabilitation and/or education to assist these veterans to prepare for and obtain gainful employment, enhanced opportunities for employment, job placement and self-employment, so that the full array of talents and abilities of disabled veterans are used productively and to their greatest levels.

We are a resolution-based organization, which means we can support legislation if we have a resolution that is adopted by our membership body at our annual national convention. We are pleased to provide our views on the bills impacting service-disabled veterans, their families and the programs administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that are under consideration by the Subcommittee.

H.R. 522, the Deliver for Veterans Act

The Deliver for Veterans Act would include the shipping cost to deliver a vehicle to a veteran that has entitlement to the VA Adaptive Vehicle Grant.

Currently, a veteran can only spend funds from the Adaptive Vehicle Grant on the purchase of a vehicle excluding the shipping costs. This legislation would correct this problem by allowing a veteran to have their vehicle shipped to them without having to pay an additional charge.

DAV strongly supports H.R. 522, the Deliver for Veterans Act in accordance with DAV Resolution No. 032. We believe that veterans should never have to cover costs that are related to their earned VA benefits.

H.R. 2830, the Veteran Improvement Commercial Driver License Act of 2023

The Veteran Improvement Commercial Driver License (CDL) Act would approve a commercial driver education program at a branch of an institution of higher education if the program offered at the branch by the educational institution is appropriately

licensed and uses the same curriculum that is offered at the main campus of the institution and is approved by a state agency.

H.R. 2830 would ensure CDL schools that offer courses at new branches do not have to wait two years if the primary institution has been approved by the VA and state approving agencies to receive GI bill benefits. It is estimated that 8,400 commercial driving programs have been approved for use by eligible veterans under the GI bill.

This bipartisan legislation will ease the pathway for veterans to acquire a commercial driving license, helping address the trucking shortage, employ veterans, and strengthen our supply chains. In accordance with DAV Resolution No. 187, we fully support the Veterans Improvement Commercial Driver License Act as it would provide unique opportunities for service-disabled veterans to obtain a CDL and overcome their employment barriers.

H.R. 3601, the Student Veteran Work Study Modernization Act

The Student Veteran Work Study Modernization Act would require VA to implement a five-year pilot program to expand eligibility for the work-study allowance program to individuals who are pursuing programs of rehabilitation, education, or training at a rate equal to at least half of that required of a full-time student.

The VA Work Study program allows veterans to earn money while enrolled in an institution of higher education, vocational, or professional program. Participants gain paid work experience while furthering their education. Currently, the program limits the types of positions a student veteran can hold and does not permit payment at local minimum wage rates. The program also requires enrollment on at least a three-quarter-time basis, excluding half-time enrollees.

Pursuing higher education and gaining meaningful employment are two of the most common post-military endeavors for veterans as they transition to civilian life, and the VA's work-study program has been an invaluable tool in accomplishing both goals for many student veterans. As the VA modernizes and digitizes numerous other benefits, it's imperative that the department provides greater transparency to Congress about the program's successes while expanding its eligibility to student veterans who are pursuing academic programs on at least a half-time basis.

In accordance with DAV Resolution No. 183, we proudly support the Student Veteran Work Study Modernization Act. The VA work-study program better positions student veterans for future employment and H.R. 3601 will provide this benefit to more service-disabled veterans, which will result in more victories for veterans.

H.R. 3722, the Daniel J. Harvey, Jr. and Adam Lambert Improving Servicemember Transition to Reduce Veteran Suicide and the Amendment in the Nature of a Substitute to it

H.R. 3722 would require the Department of Defense (DoD) and VA to jointly carry out a five-year pilot program to assess the feasibility and advisability of providing certain services and a module comprised of specified elements as part of the pre-separation transition process for members of the Armed Forces for the purpose of reducing the incidence of suicide among veterans. DAV supported this bill in its original form.

The Amendment in the Nature of a Substitute to H.R. 3722 states that under the DoD Transition Assistance Program (TAP) program mental health services will be available for service members with certain mental health markers, to include post-traumatic stress disorder, risk of suicide, treatment options for those with substance-use disorders and potential stressors associated with leaving active military service. Under the VA Solid Start Program the amendment would assist eligible veterans to enroll in the program and educate them on mental health and counseling services available through the Veterans Health Administration. A joint report from DoD and VA is due to the committees on information gathered from these programs.

The DoD TAP program provides information and training to ensure service members leaving active duty are prepared for their next step in life, whether pursuing additional education, finding employment in the public or private sector, or starting their own business.

The VA portion of TAP is a one-day, in-person course called VA Benefits and Services. Led by VA Benefits Advisors, the course helps veterans understand how to navigate VA and the benefits and services they have earned through their military career. The course offers interactive exercises, real examples, and covers topics important to veterans like family support, disability compensation, education, and health care benefits.

H.R. 3722 would add or improve mental health services to both sides of the transition process to ensure that service members and veterans are well aware of the mental health services that are available to them and their families.

We strongly supports H.R. 3722 and the Amendment in the Nature of a Substitute to it in accordance with DAV Resolution Nos. 059 and 160, which support legislation to improve and reform TAP programs, to include mental health services for our transitioning service members, veterans and their families.

H.R. 3738, to establish in the Department of Veterans Affairs the Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration

H.R. 3738 would establish the Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration. This administration would have a projected start date of October 1, 2024, be responsible for six departments within the VA and provide veterans, their dependents and survivors assistance with related economic opportunities. The bill requires an annual report during the fiscal year to include information on the number of claims received and denied, as well as other information.

The Under Secretary for this administration will be appointed by the President. Once a vacancy happens or is anticipated, a commission will be established to recommend individuals to the President. The commission will be comprised of 10 individuals from various areas within the VA, to include the Deputy Secretary of the VA.

No later than six months after the passage of this Act, the VA Secretary must submit a report on the progress of establishing the new Administration and the transition of the provision of services to veterans. The VA Secretary would be required to certify that the transition of the provision of services to the Administration will not negatively affect services to veterans and that such services are ready to be transferred. Certification can happen no earlier than April 1, 2024 and no later than September 1, 2024. If certification cannot be administered during the required time period, the Secretary would be required to furnish a report on the reasons why the certification was not achieved and estimate a time frame on when it can be completed.

Establishing a fourth administration within the VA dedicated to creating economic opportunities for veterans would increase the visibility and accountability of all veterans education and employment-related programs. For example, as we highlighted in our testimony before this Subcommittee on September 15, 2022, the Veterans Readiness and Employment Program started working on an electronic case management system for vocational rehabilitation counselors however, after nine years, three failed attempts for a digital platform and over \$20 million spent, Veteran Readiness & Employment (VR&E) still does not have a digital case management system.

DAV believes that the failures of the VR&E case management system is indicative of a lack of focus, direction, as well as a constant change of administrations. This is one of many examples of why we believe VA needs a fourth administration.

Based on DAV Resolution No. 405, we recommend Congress separate from the Veterans Benefits Administration all programs related to economic opportunity and create a new administration that should be appropriately funded and administered by an Under Secretary for Economic Opportunity.

H.R. 3816, the Veterans' Entry to Apprenticeship Act

The Veterans' Entry to Apprenticeship Act would make pre-apprenticeship programs available to eligible veterans and dependents who are using VA educational programs, such as the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill and Dependents Educational Assistance (DEA) Program also referenced as Chapter 35 benefits.

H.R. 3816 would allow for a pre-apprenticeship program to be covered if the curriculum is approved by a sponsor that can certify to the VA that the program will prepare an individual with skills and competencies needed to enroll in a registered apprenticeship program. Additionally, it grants a veteran eligibility for a specified amount of housing assistance if not paid as part of a pre-apprenticeship program.

Transitioning from service to civilian life provides a number of challenges for veterans and their families. If they are able to better prepare for an apprenticeship program success is more likely. We are pleased that that legislation includes DEA for family members however, we note that it does not include VR&E. Although VR&E does include apprenticeship programs, it does not provide for pre-apprenticeship programs therefore, we recommend that a provision for VR&E be added, as service-disabled veterans face many barriers due to disabilities incurred during military service.

In accordance with DAV Resolution No. 187, we fully support H.R. 3816, the Veterans' Entry to Apprenticeship Act and request that the Subcommittee consider our recommendation noted above for inclusion of VR&E to ensure parity for all veterans utilizing these VA programs.

H.R. 5190, the Military Family Protection from Debt Act

The Military Protection from Debt Act would amend the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act to extend the protections for others than active military service.

The legislation would reduce interest rates on pre-service loans for the families of Reserve and Guard service members serving on active duty and ease financial burdens while their service member is deployed. Interest rates are already capped at 6% for service members during their deployment—H.R. 5190 would provide parity by expanding the same protections to military family members.

While we do not have a resolution to support this legislation, we would not oppose its passage.

H.R. 5785, to modify the requirements of the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship

The Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship allows eligible veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill or dependents using the Fry Scholarship to get added benefits. This

scholarship provides up to nine months (or \$30,000) of benefits for training in high-demand fields.

Currently, an eligible student veteran would have to be pursuing a post-secondary degree, dual degree or an undergraduate degree in certain fields of study before consideration can be given for this scholarship. Additionally, a student veteran would have to have 60 semester or 90 quarter hours to be eligible for the scholarship.

The modification to the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship would broaden the entitlement to eligibility for and decrease the number of semester or quarter hours required to become eligible for the scholarship. If implemented, the bill would change those requirements to allow graduate students or those pursuing a graduate degree program eligibility for the scholarship. It would also lower the semester and quarter hours requirements to 45 semester hours or 67.5 quarter hours.

We support the modification to the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship program, based on DAV Resolution No. 187. We need to ensure that student veterans have the ability to fully access their earned educational benefits while removing barriers that could derail their continued education.

Draft bill, the Expanding Access for Online Veteran Students Act

The Expanding Access for Online Veteran Students Act would increase the monthly housing stipend for student veterans that pursue their education through distance learning for the summer quarter or semester. The rate of allowance would be equal to the amount paid to other student veterans based on a standard formula. The effective date for this housing allowance would be August 1, 2024.

Additionally, this legislation would positively impact rural and highly rural student veterans by providing them the ability to continue their education with an institution of higher learning that may be out of their normal commuting area.

We are pleased to support this draft bill—the Expanding Access for Online Veteran Students Act, based on DAV Resolution No. 187. We need to ensure that student veterans have the ability to fully access their earned educational benefits while removing barriers that could derail their continued education. This legislation would help to provide them the means to reach their full potential without prohibitions.

Draft bill, to improve the processes to approve programs of education for purposes of the educational assistance programs of the Department of Veterans Affairs

This draft legislation would require that student veterans are provided with a form that includes significant information about the cost of the course and other relevant information. The student would be able to compare the course with other similar courses offered at other schools to determine which aid package would be to their

advantage. This legislation would also require the VA to establish and update a website to be used as the central location for training information for VA School Certifying Officials (SCO).

A SCO is an employee of an educational institution with the primary responsibility for certifying veteran enrollment at the educational institution. SCOs at educational institutions normally have at least 20 or more enrolled student veterans using educational assistance. They are required to complete training prior to being authorized to certify enrollments to VA. This legislation would create a centralized location for SCOs to find the most up-to-date training information.

Currently, student veterans are not provided enough information to make good decisions on what courses to take and what school offers the better aid package for them. This bill would provide students with more information to make a better-informed decision about where and how to use their educational benefits.

In accordance with DAV Resolution No. 187, DAV strongly supports this legislation, which will remove barriers and streamline the education process for service-disabled veterans.

Draft bill, the Transparency for Student Veterans Act

The Transparency for Student Veterans Act would provide student veterans with additional information about programs of education leading to a certificate or professional license at a particular institution of higher learning. The bill would also require tracking of certain student veteran information, to include how many have re-enrolled after the first year, the number of them that have completed their degrees or received a certificate or professional license. It would also track the time period in which it took student veterans to finish their program of study and the annual salaries they received once their programs have been completed.

Additionally, this legislation would require the VA Secretary to enter into a memorandum of understanding with the Secretary of Education and the leaders of other relevant federal agencies to gather information on the outcomes of the student veterans who use the programs of educational assistance at institutions of higher learning.

Currently, student veterans do not have all of the information they need to make informed decisions about their options for educational programs at their institutions of higher learning. This bill would provide student veterans with key information to help them determine if they want to continue their educational program at a particular school.

We support this draft legislation—the Transparency for Student Veterans Act, based on DAV Resolution Nos. 070 and 187. VA systems need to be upgraded and improved to help facilitate the flow of information to student veterans and their dependents, especially those receiving educational assistance from the VA. There is a

need for VA to share vital information for student veterans so they can use their earned educational benefits to their fullest extent.

Draft bill, the Consolidating Veteran Employment Services for Improved Performance Act of 2023

The Consolidating Veteran Employment Services for Improved Performance Act would transfer functions performed by the Department of Labor (DOL) to the VA. This would apply to the following programs, effective October 1, 2025:

- Job counseling, training, and placement services for veterans under chapter 41 of title 38, United States Code;
- Federal Government employment services by the Secretary of Labor under section 4214 of title 38, United States Code;
- Administration of employment and reemployment rights of members of the uniformed services under chapter 43 of title 38, United States Code;
- Homeless veterans reintegration programs under chapter 20 of title 38, United States Code; and
- Employment and veterans benefits training under the Transition Assistance Program under section 1144 of title 10, United States Code.

A new Deputy Under Secretary for Veterans' Employment and Training would be established within VA to oversee these functions, along with any other employment, unemployment, and training programs affecting veterans.

Additionally, this would consolidate the current positions of Local Veterans' Employment Representative (LVER) and Disabled Veterans Outreach Program (DVOP) Specialist into a new position called Veterans Employment Specialist. Current LVERs and DVOPs, who are employed directly by states, would be retained and reclassified to these new positions.

DAV does not have a resolution on this specific issue, and takes no formal position on this draft bill.

Draft bill, to waive the fee for a housing loan guaranteed by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs for a veteran with a service-connected disability who applied for such loan before receiving a disability rating from the Secretary

This draft legislation would grant a veteran a refund of their housing loan fee if the veteran was awarded disability compensation prior to the date of their loan application.

The VA funding fee is a one-time payment that the veteran, service member, or survivor pays on a VA-backed or VA direct home loan. This fee helps to lower the cost of the loan for U.S. taxpayers because the VA home loan program doesn't require down payments or monthly mortgage insurance.

A veteran would not have to pay the VA funding fee if they are in receipt of VA compensation for a service-connected disability. But if a veteran applied for a VA home loan prior to receiving their award of benefits from the VA, then they may be eligible for a refund of the VA funding fee if they are later awarded VA compensation for a service-connected disability. The effective date of their VA compensation must be retroactive to before the date of the loan closing.

DAV does not have a specific resolution that would allow our support for this legislation, but we understand the importance of this benefit for potential service-disabled veterans and their families and would not oppose passage of this legislation.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony on behalf of DAV. I am happy to answer any questions you or members of the Subcommittee may have.