## ⑪ Upgrade GI Bill & Education Benefits

### Implement Digital GI Bill Upgrade

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has had shortcomings for years, specifically surrounding Information Technology (IT). There have been minor delays in processing claims and benefits, and there have been catastrophic failures such as the Forever GI Bill housing payment issue in the fall of 2018. Without adequate IT resources capable of performing critical administrative tasks, there will inevitably be more breakdowns in the delivery of veterans' benefits or services.

Many new IT systems were recently developed and implemented by the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) to support several program transformations. However, limited IT funding has caused delays in developing and deploying critical IT systems and programming each year. Critical IT systems are rarely fully developed before business process changes are implemented. Instead, they are phased in over several years, forcing the VBA to rely on an inconsistent mix of old and new IT systems, as well as an endless stream of suboptimal workaround solutions.

While it may be understandable from a budgetary perspective, it is a failure from a functional perspective. Providing only partial IT solutions inevitably results in a loss of productivity and often leads to lower quality and less accurate decisions on veterans' claims and appeals.

There are multiple platforms within VA's Education Services (VA ES) that need critical IT upgrades: programs that process original and supplemental claims; VA ES' interaction with the State Approving Agencies (SAA); VA-ONCE; and its Business Decision Network, which is a legacy system long overdue for replacement. These are just some of the platforms within VA ES that should be upgraded and streamlined into single programs to make customer service more efficient and cut costs.

The Independent Budget veterans service organizations (IBVSOs) propose the "Digital GI Bill '' upgrade as the best, most cost-efficient upgrade to bring VA ES into the 21st century. A one-time fully funded infusion of resources for VA's IT programs, specifically aimed at VA ES, would overhaul many of the long-needed platforms that the office is struggling to maintain. It would also allow VA ES to function properly, instead of consistently requiring workarounds and patchwork solutions to maintain functionality.

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The Digital GI Bill would accommodate many requests Congress and veterans service organizations (VSOs) have been making for years. After the IT overhaul, VA ES would have a cleaner platform to replace VA-ONCE for School Certifying Officials, SAAs, and VA officials, so

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they can all have the ability to view one screen when interacting with each other instead of different individual platforms. The GI Bill Comparison Tool would be able to be upgraded regularly instead of housing years old information that is difficult to corroborate or edit once in place. It could provide a digital Certificate of Eligibility for GI Bill using similar automated technology as the VA Home Loan. It would also allow for platforms to be introduced that can accommodate the data-sharing agreements between VA and other agencies. Finally, it would be able to track GI Bill users so easier notifications can be made to all benefits users to deliver timely information regarding updates or changes.

The Digital GI Bill upgrade is a long-overdue upgrade to a critical program office within VA. Far too many times stakeholders, such as Congress and VSOs, have collectively overlooked IT resources for new programs and needed changes within VA ES. For example, a change to VA

Work-Study was recently passed into law adjusting the payment schedule for work-study recipients. Unfortunately, VA does not have a current platform to calculate and deliver those new payments, and no additional IT funding was provided to support the program's changes. Unfunded mandates such as the work-study change will lead to VA ES trying to create yet another workaround, and to use already overworked and outdated systems to perform a new task for which they were not intended.

We believe that every new proposal going forward must include IT needs to accomplish program goals. Minor delays can be avoided by ensuring proper IT funding is added to all new proposals. Hopefully, we can avoid a repeat of what took place during the Forever GI Bill's final implementation.

A project initiative like the Digital GI Bill would set VA ES up for success for future years to come. It would also head off any delays by ensuring veterans receive their benefits to utilize some truly life-changing programs offered by VA.

## Standardize Military Housing Allowance (MHA)
The current payment rate of GI Bill MHA for students attending school exclusively through Online Training is half the national average. In 2020, COVID-19 pushed most education classes to an online only format for certain periods of time. This highlighted the need to revamp the basic allowance for housing payment scale for online-only training. The IBVSOs recommend a standardized payment model for all online-only education training that sets a standard rate closer to the in-person payment rates for all GI Bill beneficiaries utilizing online or distance learning. ◆

## The IBVSOs Recommend:

● VA request and Congress authorize and appropriate $250 million for the Digital GI Bill IT upgrade.

● Congress consolidate GI Bill MHA rates for online-only and in-person training students.