

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

February 6, 2025

The Honorable Doug Collins
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary:

The Trump Administration issued a hiring freeze on January 20, 2025, and we are concerned about the impact this will have on veterans accessing their earned educational benefits through the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The memorandum authorizing the freeze states:

As part of this freeze, no Federal civilian position that is vacant at noon on January 20, 2025, may be filled, and no new position may be created except as otherwise provided for in this memorandum or other applicable law. ...Moreover, nothing in this memorandum shall adversely impact the provision of Social Security, Medicare, or Veterans' benefits. In addition, the Director of the Office of Personnel Management may grant exemptions from this freeze where those exemptions are otherwise necessary. ...Contracting outside the Federal Government to circumvent the intent of this memorandum is prohibited.

However, in the memo issued on January 21, 2025, to VA Undersecretaries, Assistant Secretaries and other key personnel intended to provide additional guidance on these orders, the list of exempted occupations fails to include any positions connected to education, employment training, home loans, or any of the many earned benefits (aside from healthcare), that our nation's heroes have the right to access for their everyday lives. We are especially concerned how the hiring freeze will impact the Veterans Readiness and Employment Program (VR&E) because of the increased uptake of this program as a result of the PACT Act.

On December 11, 2024, the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity held an oversight hearing to evaluate the effectiveness of the VR&E program including the staffing and management of vocational rehabilitation counselors (VRC) and employment counselors (EC) experiencing increased caseloads from veterans with service-connected disabilities, as well as VetSuccess on Campus counselors who provide on-campus support services across 104 schools and IDES counselors who provide early intervention and outreach services to facilitate service members' transition at 70 military installations. These positions often require specialized education, including a master's degree or higher for VRCs. However, during this hearing we learned that hiring and retaining staff in these critical service roles has been challenging. The existing shortage of staff often results in backlogs in wait times

for appointments, delays in processing enrollments in schools or job training programs, and inaccurate payment of benefits such as living stipends or tuition. We know that many veterans with disabilities want to continue their service to our country by furthering their education and finding meaningful employment which is what VR&E provides. This hiring freeze will only further hinder VA's overall capacity to serve veterans, whatever their needs may be.

VA must have adequate staff to address all veterans' many complex and interrelated needs. For example, veterans experiencing mental health issues may be less likely to "fall through the cracks" if they have additional touchpoints with VA staff during the transition period, or when seeking education or employment training programs. VA desperately needs the most qualified people to provide excellent service to our nation's veterans.

We request that you answer the following questions as to how VA plans to work with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to exempt occupations related to VR&E and other related G.I. Bill benefits that increase veterans' economic opportunities.

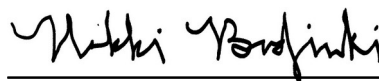
1. Will VA request an exemption from the hiring freeze from OPM to hire staff servicing veterans' economic opportunity benefits including all positions needed to administer the VR&E program?
2. To your knowledge, have any VR&E-connected positions been rescinded? If so, please list the date of rescission, job title, grade level, pay band, and location. Please also specify if any of these job offers were made to candidates who were veterans hired under the hiring preference.
3. If an exemption is not granted, and wait times continue to increase for veterans, would the Administration reconsider an exemption as soon as possible to minimize the impact to disabled veterans seeking employment?
4. If the positions that were rescinded go unfilled, how will VA ensure there is no backlog for processing requests such as educational benefits payments, individual employment counseling sessions, or other delays in services? What if anything is VA's plan to ensure veterans do not experience significant delays in accessing their earned benefits?
5. Many veterans establish businesses that contract with VA. Since contracting is also prohibited, please list the number of VA contracts with veteran-owned businesses that have been canceled or paused at this time. Please list the length and amount of the contracts that are affected to assess the impact this will have on veterans' businesses.

We ask that you respond to these questions no later than **February 14, 2025**. Additionally, we request that you provide a briefing to Subcommittee staff no later than February 14, 2025. Thank you for your immediate attention and response to these concerns.

Sincerely,



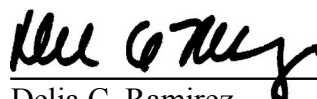
Chris Pappas
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Economic
Opportunity



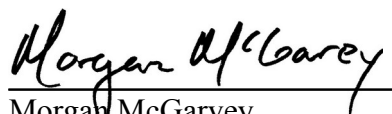
Nikki Budzinski
Member of Congress



Julia Brownley
Member of Congress



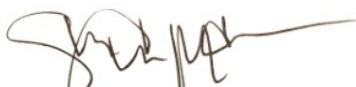
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