

Wounded Warrior Employment Improvement Act of 2015

Background: Many wounded warriors face numerous challenges affecting their ability to find and retain employment. These include mental health conditions, working with multiple Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program (VR&E) counselors over time, and civilian employers having a limited understanding of a veteran's military work experience. It often takes veterans over 6 years to achieve success, frequently due to a veteran's temporary departure from the VR&E program.

Additionally, veterans with service-connected disabilities who served after September 11, 2001, have an unacceptably high unemployment rate – despite an improving economy.

Issue: Impeding the performance of VA VR&E counselors is the fact that the performance index of VR&E counselors is measured using standards that may not be applicable to working with veterans, such as evaluating success by the total number of successful outcomes, rather than rate of successful outcomes. This metric can pressure counselors to take on large caseloads to improve their total number of successful cases, to the detriment of the wounded warriors they serve.

Employees must have a specific success rate for Serious Employment Handicap (SEH) cases, which leads employees to feel pressured to mark additional claims as SEH cases in order to achieve their performance standards. These standards interfere with the care and rehabilitation success of our veterans.

Solution: This bill requires the Secretary of the VA to develop and publish an action plan for improving the training and rehabilitation provided by the VA for veterans with service-connected disabilities, including:

- Create a plan to remedy workload management, by reducing the caseload per counselor, at VA regional offices,
- Analyze why a very low percentage of post-9/11 veterans opt to participate in VA rehabilitation programs instead of seeking VA educational assistance,
- Develop a plan to increase participation in VA rehabilitation programs for veterans serving since September 11, 2001; and
- Create a national staff training program for vocational rehabilitation counselors specifically geared towards rehabilitation of injured veterans, including training on post-traumatic stress disorder, mental health conditions, and traumatic brain injury.

Supporters: The American Legion, the Wounded Warrior Project, the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), and the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) all support this legislation.

Cost: While the Congressional Budget Office has not scored the bill yet, but its initial estimate is that the legislation has “no cost.”