United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 13, 2018

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20571

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

We are writing with significant concerns regarding the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' processing delays for veterans receiving Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits. For many of our nation's veterans, the living stipend payments were expected by September 1, 2018, and the multi-month delays create a real crisis to not only their long-term education and career goals, but also their daily needs. Regardless of what caused or is causing the delay, we believe it is imperative for VA to address this issue with the urgency it deserves. We will not stop pressing for information and action until every veteran receives the benefits they earned in their service to our country.

The reported impact of these delayed benefits is significant. Media reports suggest between 340,000 and 360,000 veterans have been receiving the incorrect amount of money for their housing stipends due to ongoing information technology system failures at VA.[1] Additionally, reporting from last month suggests there is a backlog of between 140,000 and 228,000 pending education claims.[2] While we recognize that the policy for calculating Basic Allowance for Housing was recently revised and the number of claims overall has increased, these errors and corresponding delay are hurting veterans around the country who depend on these benefits to get the education they have earned. As of November 8, press reports citing VA data show over 82,000 veterans were still waiting on housing payments.[3] There is a serious risk of significant financial hardship or veterans even becoming homeless if they do not receive these payments.

As a nation we have a responsibility to be there for our veterans, and part of that duty involves fulfilling our promise to ensure they have access to education after they leave the service. These errors and delays undermine the intent of the GI Bill and put unnecessary and avoidable strain on veterans and their families during a critical time of transition.

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[1] Natalie Gross, "Why the VA is botching cash housing stipends for 360,000 GI Bill users." *Military Times*, 27 September 2018. https://rebootcamp.militarytimes.com/news/education/2018/09/27/no-end-in-sight-for-gi-bill-payment-problems/ ; Nikki Wentling, "Student veterans, schools frustrated over lack of housing payments from VA." *Stars and Stripes*, 5 October 2018. https://www.stripes.com/news/student-veterans-schools-frustrated-over-lack-of-housing-payments-from-va-1.550640

[2] Jim Absher, "VA Acknowledges Delays in GI Bill." *Military.com*, 10 October 2018. https://www.military.com/paycheck-chronicles/2018/10/10/va-acknowledges-delays-gi-bill-payments.html; Nikki Wentling, "Student veterans, schools frustrated over lack of housing payments from VA." *Stars and Stripes*, 5 October 2018. https://www.stripes.com/news/student-veterans-schools-frustrated-over-lack-of-housing-payments-from-va-1.550640; Julianne Stanford, "Olympic College students feeling the pinch from delayed GI Bill benefits payments." *Kitsap Sun.*, 21 October 2018. https://www.kitsapsun.com/story/news/local/2018/10/21/gi-bill-payments-delayed-student-veterans-olympic-college/1677466002/

[3] Phil McClausland, "Veterans haven't received GI Bill benefits for months due to ongoing IT issues at VA." *NBC News*, 11 November 2018. https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/veterans-haven-t-receive-gi-bill-benefits-months-due-ongoing-n934696

We understand VA employees are working overtime and with additional support to address this challenge, but given the conflicting media accounts and the pressing nature of the concern, we ask for the following essential information necessary to conduct oversight on implementation of the GI Bill:

1. An update on the number of veterans who are currently receiving the incorrect housing stipend amount, as well as an update on the number of education claims pending.
2. The average wait time for payment of any education benefit claims, by type of claim.
3. The number of regular or contract full-time equivalent (FTE) employees currently working to resolve the IT failure, disaggregated by hiring authority.
4. The total number of FTEs receiving overtime pay for implementation, and the dollar amount of such overtime.
5. A detailed report on the origin of the IT failures leading to processing delays, including when VA first became aware of the issue.
6. An account of immediate steps being taken to ensure those veterans for whom the housing stipend is most essential—such as those with dependents or facing the risk of housing insecurity or homelessness—are prioritized.
7. An account of why education claims are backlogged at a significantly higher rate than last year, and a plan for how VA will ensure this does not happen next year. Additionally, VA's education service has said processing times are higher in the fall – since this is an entirely foreseeable issue, please describe what steps VA takes each year to increase processing capacity so wait times do not increase.

We request periodic updates on the figures in questions one through four every two weeks until the problem is resolved. VA must also provide Congress with the steps it will take to ensure these issues never happen again.

Finally, we ask that VA publicly confirm on its website that the agency will not retroactively collect overpayments to students resulting from the IT failures. These errors are not our veterans' fault and any collection will add further disruption and hardship to their education. [4]

We appreciate all you do to ensure we live up to our duty to our veterans and hope to work with you and VA to ensure this issue is addressed as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Patty Murray
United States Senator

Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

[4] Nikki Wentling, "Students using GI Bill receive incorrect housing payments due to VA technical errors." *Stars and Stripes.* 19 September 2018. https://www.stripes.com/news/students-using-gi-bill-receive-incorrect-housing-payments-due-to-va-technical-errors-1.548276

Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator

Sherrod Brown
United States Senator

Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator