

Congress of the United States  
House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

May 21, 2024

REPLY TO:

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<https://pallone.house.gov/>

The Honorable Denis McDonough  
Secretary  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Ave NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough,

I write to share my concern about reports of communication failures and a general lack of responsiveness by VA Regional Offices, specifically Education Liaison Representatives (ELR) in various states. I urge you to take meaningful steps to quickly address this issue and ensure veterans and their families receive the educational benefits they earned.

As you know, ELRs are responsible for promptly informing State Approving Agencies (SAA), schools, and training establishments of changes in policies and procedures. Given their critical role, it is deeply concerning that the School Certifying Officials (SCO) at a public university in my district, Rutgers University, have had little to no contact with New Jersey's ELR for more than a year with few exceptions. For your convenience, I have attached a letter relaying these specific concerns from Ann Treadaway, the Director of Veteran and Military Programs and Services at Rutgers University. Unfortunately, this is just one example of the Department not living up to our commitments to student veterans. On February 16, 2024, SCOs throughout New Jersey were notified that they would no longer be able to contact an ELR directly, and instead would need to submit all their questions through AskVA. Universities have indicated that response times vary, and it can take anywhere between one hour to seven days, though some have reported that they are still waiting for a response after more than a week.

The purpose of the VA is to serve our nation's veterans and deliver benefits they earned in a reliable and equitable manner. There are too many instances of a lack of communication from the VA to federally funded higher education institutions on important matters relating to veterans' education programs. Rutgers University has relayed its concerns to the Department, even highlighting an incident where the SCO at the Rutgers School of Public Health was notified via email on April 14, 2023, that the school was selected for a compliance survey on April 6, 2023. In that instance, Rutgers reached out to both the ELR and the VA Regional Chief Education Liaison Officer (CELO) and never received a response. Instead, on April 18, the SCO received a response that the Compliance Survey Specialist, an employee of St. George Consulting, the third party the VA has contracted, would be there in two days on April 20, 2023. The SCO requested more time because she was only given two days' notice and was denied. The VA's *M22-4, Part 10, Compliance Survey. Chapter 03. Compliance Survey Procedures* states that schools should be notified in advance – generally at least 30 days – of an anticipated compliance survey.

The ELR role has been to promptly inform “SAAs, schools, and training establishments of changes in policies and procedures.” However, institutions of higher education in New Jersey were not informed of changes to the compliance survey notification process made in the Veterans Auto and Education Improvement Act. For Rutgers University, this update that schools were to receive no more than 10 business days of notice prior to conducting a compliance survey came in real time from Saint George Consulting, a third-party contractor hired by the VA to conduct surveys. These changes should have been promptly communicated to institutions through dedicated channels to ensure they have the tools and resources to remain in compliance with federal law. This process cannot operate effectively if the Department does not properly notify SCOs within a reasonable timeframe and if institutions cannot reach the regional office for clarification when necessary.

Unfortunately, these are not anomalous incidents only impacting New Jersey institutions. Other universities from around the country have made similar complaints about the lack of communication or timely notification of changes to processes. On September 20, 2023<sup>1</sup>, Joe Rasmussen, the Director of Veteran Services at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, testified at a House Veterans' Affairs Committee hearing that his school did not receive updated policy advisories from the VA.

These complaints and lapses in communication have a real impact on our student veterans as well. Justin Monk, Director of Policy for the Student Veterans of America, also testified before the House Veterans Affairs Committee on July 20, 2022<sup>2</sup>, and made clear that the feedback they received from students, schools, and SCOs all indicate examples of delayed or never-delivered guidance from the VA. In other instances, even when the VA offered guidance, the information was often incorrect or incomplete.

Our nation’s veterans and universities should not have to jump through bureaucratic hurdles to speak with VA representatives and access educational benefits. These communication issues appear to be a longstanding problem. The VA acknowledged this unacceptable precedent as far back as 2011<sup>3</sup> when the Department described the need to improve communications between the VA and institutions of higher education. There are even instances of schools not hearing from or knowing who their ELR is, forcing them to rely on outside organizations like the Student Veterans Association for assistance. These concerns are negatively impacting student veterans and their ability to access their educational benefits.

Given the issues outlined above, please provide answers to the following questions:

1. What are the roles and responsibilities of the ELR? What are the required qualifications for those applying to be an ELR?

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<sup>1</sup> [Hearing: Less is More: The Impact of Bureaucratic Red Tape on Veterans Education Benefits](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Joint Subcommittees on Economic Opportunity and Technology Modernization Hearing](#)

<sup>3</sup> [“VA and GI Bill Schools Work to Improve Communication.”](#) VA News

2. Does each state currently have a dedicated ELR as indicated on the VA's website?<sup>4</sup> Is the VA experiencing a shortage of ELRs? If so, what are the causes and what resources are necessary to address these shortfalls?
3. How many ELRs are currently employed by the Department? In your best judgment, how many ELRs are required to meet the needs of all student veterans?
4. What steps, if any, is the Department currently taking to improve communication between the VA and institutions of higher education?
5. How can the Department ensure a more consistent experience for veteran students and institutions of higher education?
6. What is the Department doing to clearly communicate relevant changes in federal law to officials at SAAs, training establishments, and universities?
7. What efforts has the Department made to ensure institutions and relevant stakeholders receive updated manuals that reflect the changes made by the signing of the Veterans Auto and Education Improvement Act? Have SCO trainings been updated to reflect changes to the law or process?

Thank you for your ongoing commitment to our nation's veterans and their education. I commend the VA's efforts to support student veterans and your shared commitment to helping them transition back to civilian life. I look forward to working with you to ensure more is done to help veterans utilize the benefits and resources they earned through service and sacrifice.

I appreciate your consideration of these requests and look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Frank Pallone, Jr." in a cursive style.

FRANK PALLONE, JR.  
Member of Congress

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<sup>4</sup> [Education and Training, Education Liaison Representatives](#)