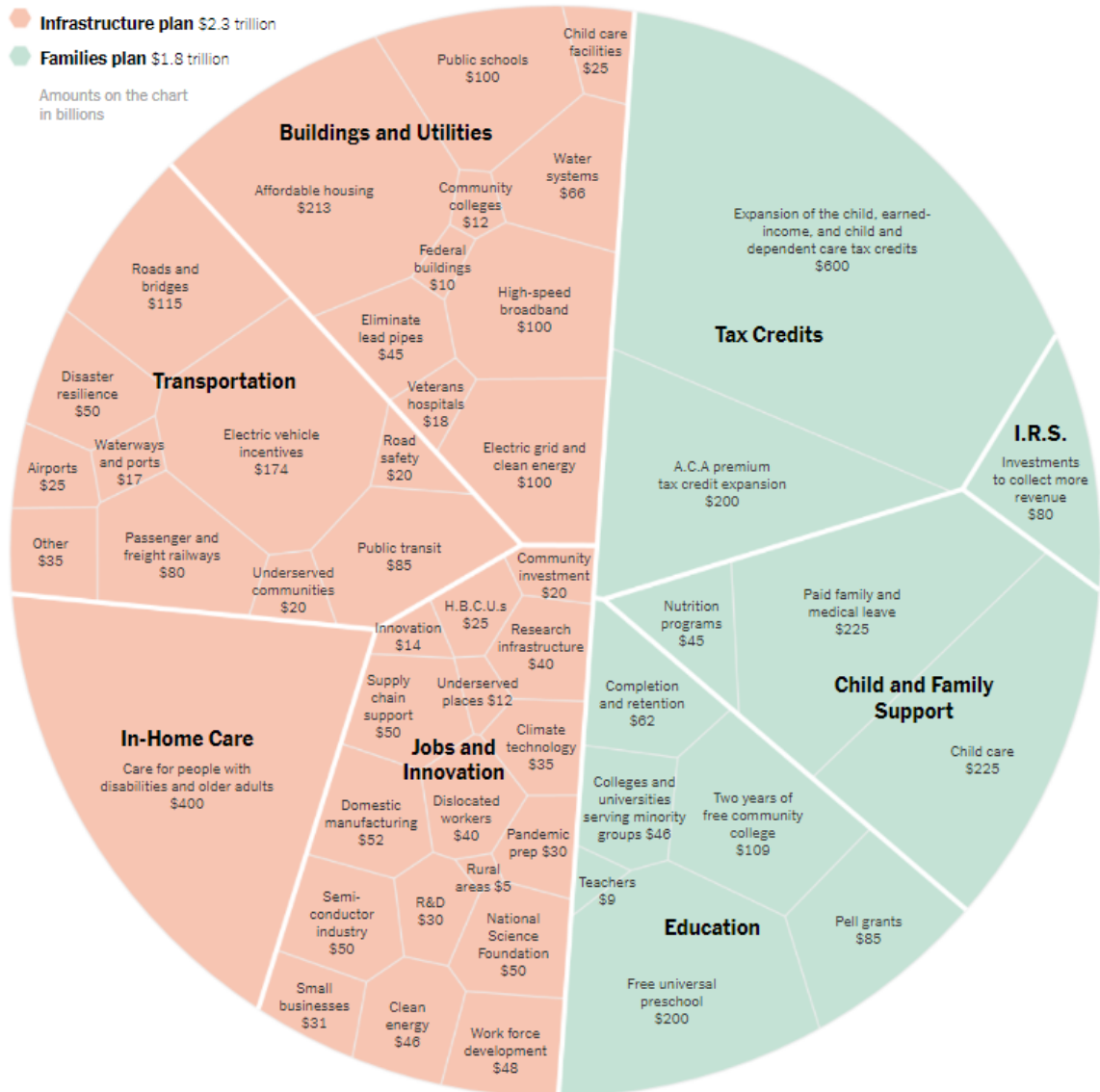


NATIONAL VETERANS EMPLOYMENT & EDUCATION COMMISSION

TOPIC 1: ECONOMY

BIDEN'S \$4 TRILLION ECONOMIC PLAN, IN ONE CHART

President Biden released the second portion of his economic plan on Wednesday: \$1.8 trillion in new spending and tax cuts over ten years for workers, families, and children. That's on top of the \$2.3 trillion infrastructure plan he released at the end of March. Together, here's what's included:



Note: The plan released by the White House did not include estimated costs for the expansion of the child tax credit, earned-income tax credit, or child and dependent care tax credit. The \$600 billion estimate is the difference between the total tax cuts mentioned in the plan (\$800 billion) and the \$200 billion included for Affordable Care Act premium tax credits. - Source: The White House

Most of the spending and tax cuts in Wednesday's proposal is directed at families, with provisions for a national paid family and medical leave program; child care subsidies; and extensions of several tax credit expansions from the most recent Covid-19 relief law.

Newly proposed education spending includes universal prekindergarten for 3- and 4-year-olds; two years of free community college; an increase in the maximum Pell Grant award; and investments in colleges and universities serving minority groups.

The plan also calls on Congress to adjust the unemployment insurance system so that it would automatically link the length and amount of benefits to economic conditions. The president intends to pay for the infrastructure portion of the plan with 15 years of higher taxes on corporations.

The proposal announced Wednesday would be financed partly through tax increases on the wealthiest Americans. Part of that strategy is to give more money and enforcement power to the Internal Revenue Service to crack down on tax evasion.

BIDEN DETAILS \$1.8 TRILLION PLAN FOR WORKERS, STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

The American Families Plan, as the White House calls it, follows the \$2.3 trillion infrastructure package President Biden introduced last month, bringing his two-part package of economic proposals to just over \$4 trillion. He will present the details to a joint session of Congress on Wednesday evening.

The proposal includes \$1 trillion in new spending and \$800 billion in tax credits, much of which is aimed at expanding access to education and child care. The package includes financing for universal prekindergarten, a federal paid leave program, efforts to make child care more affordable, free community college for all, aid for students at colleges that historically serve nonwhite communities, expanded subsidies under the Affordable Care Act and an extension of new federal efforts to fight poverty.

Administration officials cast the plan as investing in an inclusive economy that would help millions of Americans gain the skills and the work flexibility they need to build middle-class lifestyles. They cited research on the benefits of government spending to help young children learn. In a 15-page briefing document, they said the package would help close racial and gender opportunity gaps across the economy.

Many of the provisions, like tax credits to help families afford child care and a landmark expansion of a tax credit meant to fight child poverty, build on measures in the \$1.9 trillion economic rescue plan Mr. Biden signed into law last month. The package would make many of those temporary measures permanent.

But the plan also includes a maze of complicated formulas for who would benefit from certain provisions — and how much of the tab state governments would need to pick up.

The package could face even more challenges than the American Jobs Plan, Mr. Biden's physical infrastructure proposal, did in Congress. The president has said repeatedly that he hopes to move his agenda with bipartisan support. But his administration remains far from reaching a consensus with Republican negotiators in the Senate.

Republicans have expressed much less interest in additional spending for education, child care and paid leave than they have for building roads and bridges. They have also chafed at the tax increases Mr. Biden has proposed, including the ones that will help pay for his latest package.

The president is proposing an increase in the marginal income tax rate for the top 1 percent of American income earners, to 39.6 percent from 37 percent. He would increase capital gains and dividend tax rates for those who earn more than \$1 million a year. And he would eliminate a provision in the tax code that reduces capital gains on some inherited assets, like vacation homes, that largely benefits the wealthy.

Mr. Biden would also invest \$80 billion in personnel and technology enhancements for the I.R.S., in hopes of netting \$700 billion in additional revenues from high earners, wealthy individuals and corporations that evade taxes.

Republicans and conservative activists have criticized all those measures. Administration officials told reporters that the president would be open to financing the spending and tax credits in his plan through alternative means, essentially challenging Republicans to name their own offsets, as Mr. Biden did with his physical infrastructure proposal.

Still, many of the details in his new proposal poll well with voters across the political spectrum. Much of the package could win the support of the full Democratic caucus in Congress, which would need to band together to pass all or part of the plan through the fast-track process known as budget reconciliation, which bypasses a Senate filibuster. Expanded access to government-subsidized preschool and community college may have broad appeal.

Workers with only high school degrees are often stuck in low-wage jobs, and two-thirds of mothers with young children are employed, and thus need reliable child care. The high cost of quality day care and pre-K puts these services out of reach for many families, who may rely on informal networks of relatives and neighbors who are untrained in early education.

Expanding access to pre-K has been particularly popular over the past decade in states and cities, including some with Republican governors. A large body of research shows that achievement gaps between poor and middle-class children emerge in the earliest years of childhood and are present on the first day of kindergarten. Administration officials contend that free, quality early childhood education can both help cash-strapped parents and build students' skills in ways that will help them become more productive workers.

Still, there are major disagreements about how generous any expansion of pre-K should be. President Barack Obama's administration generally favored a centrist approach in which new seats were geared toward lower-income families.

Mr. Biden's plan differs in that it calls for universal preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds, including those from affluent families. That is the same approach pioneered in recent years by city programs in New York and Washington, which expanded quickly to serve a diverse swath of families, but not without some evidence that they replicated the segregation and inequities of the broader K-12 education system.

Bruce Fuller, a professor of education at the University of California, Berkeley, has been a critic of the universal approach, instead favoring more targeted programs. He questioned whether states

would do their part to fund the expansion and said the goal of paying all early childhood workers \$15 per hour was too modest to broadly improve the quality and stability of the work force.

“How governors weigh these competing priorities, ethically and politically, remains an open question,” he said.

The proposed investment from Washington comes at a precarious time. Preschool enrollment declined by nearly 25 percent over the past year, largely because of the coronavirus pandemic. As of December, about half of 4-year-olds and 40 percent of 3-year-olds attended pre-K, including in remote programs. And only 13 percent of children in poverty were receiving an in-person preschool education in December, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research.

Unlike the preschool proposal, the child care plan is not universal. It would offer subsidies to families earning up to 1.5 times their state’s median income, which could be in the low six figures in some locations. It would also continue tax credits approved in the pandemic relief bill this year that offer benefits to people earning up to \$400,000 a year.

As with Mr. Biden’s previous policy proposals, the American Families Plan offers something to many traditional Democratic Party constituencies. The administration is closely tied to teachers’ unions, and while many early childhood educators are not unionized, the proposal also calls for investments in K-12 teacher education, training and pay, which are all union priorities. One goal is to bring more teachers of color into a public education system where a majority of students are nonwhite.

The expansion of free community college would apply to all students, regardless of income. It would require states to contribute to meet the goal of universal access, senior administration officials said on Tuesday. Mr. Biden would also expand Pell grants for low-income students and subsidize two years of tuition at historically Black colleges and universities, as well as at institutions that serve members of Native American tribes and other minority groups.

Mr. Fuller said he expected the community college proposal to effectively target spending to the neediest students. About one-third of all undergraduates attend public two-year colleges, which serve a disproportionate number of students from low-income families.

The paid leave program will phase in over time. The administration’s fact sheet says it will guarantee 12 weeks of paid “parental, family and personal illness/safe leave” by its 10th year in existence. Workers on leave will earn up to \$4,000 a month, with as little as two-thirds or as much as 80 percent of their incomes replaced, depending on how much they earn.

Other provisions include late concessions to key Democratic constituencies. Administration officials had removed the health care credits last week but added them back under pressure from Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California and others. They bucked pressure from House and Senate Democrats to make permanent an expanded child tax credit created by the pandemic relief bill, extending it through 2025. But the plan would make permanent one aspect of the expanded credit, which allows parents with little or no income to reap its benefits regardless of how much they earn.

[Reported by Edwin Cruz]

HOUSEHOLD DATA

Table A-5. Employment status of the civilian population 18 years and over by veteran status, period of service, and sex, not seasonally adjusted

[Numbers in thousands]

Employment status, veteran status, and period of service	Total		Men		Women	
	March 2020	March 2021	March 2020	March 2021	March 2020	March 2021
Unemployed	368	452	321	417	47	35
Unemployment rate	4.1	5.0	4.0	5.3	4.3	2.9

The national unemployment rate is 6.2 percent (February 2021). Gulf War II veterans' unemployment rate is 6.1 percent. Currently, Gulf War II women veterans' unemployment rate is 3.8 percent (no change from February).

In March 2021, the veteran unemployment rate was 4.6%. The comparable non-veteran unemployment rate was 6.0% in March.

TOPIC 2: VIRTUAL MEETINGS & CONFERENCE CALLS

On Monday, April 26, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division briefed and had a conversation with Project Coordinator, Woodall on further virtual Risk-Based Survey Model (RBS) visits and needed changes to the RBS pilot.

On Monday, April 26, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division had a conversation with the House Veterans Affairs Committee (HVAC) staff for a possible discussion on 90/10 and pending oversight legislation.

On Monday, April 26, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division met with GoArmyEd to discuss new Army ignitED education platform. Also, met with Utility Workers Union to discuss shared training policy priorities.

On Monday, April 26, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division spoke with Special Operations Association of America about their education priorities. VE&E staff detailed examples of Special Operations National Guard servicemembers who received medical discharges but were still not eligible to receive 100% GI Bill.

On Monday, April 26, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division participated in a yearly meeting of the Millennium Cohort Program Strategic Board to discuss work performed on current projects and reports regarding the health and well-being of service members and their families as they transition out of the military. Some of the issues discussed Women's Health, Adolescents, and the Cohort Family Study.

On Tuesday, April 27, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division had a conversation with the Bush Institute Higher Education Task Force members on distance learning and need for oversight.

On Tuesday, April 27, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division visited the General Assembly in Raleigh North Carolina (NC) to discuss pending veterans' issues in NC.

On Tuesday, April 27, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division met with Union Veterans Council to discuss potential Legion/AFL-CIO MOU points

On Tuesday, April 27, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division spoke with Veterans Education Success on staffing changes to their national organization. Their longtime Government Affairs Director is leaving, signaling potentially new strategic developments for the organization.

On Wednesday, April 28, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division had a conversation with Department Adjutant, Randy Cash on fundraising event involving the National Commander, the Governor, and other senior government and American Legion officials to raise money for the Veterans and Children Foundation.

On Wednesday, April 28, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division had discussions and meetings in Raleigh, referenced the veterans' benefits bills before the legislature.

On Wednesday, April 28, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division attended a webcast hosted by 50strong detailing the new DOD program MILGEARS. MILGEARS is a new online program that allows servicemembers to explore potential career pathways based on credentials, career goals, and personal interests.

On Wednesday, April 28, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division attended a virtual meeting of the Veterans Employment Transition Program of the Department of Labor annual Advisory Board. The Bureau of Labor Statistics gave a presentation regarding the unemployment rates for veterans during COVID, 2020. One highlight of the presentation included the jobless rate for all veterans increased to 6.5 percent in 2020, and the rate for Gulf War-era 11 veterans rose to 7.3 percent. These increases reflect the effect of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on the labor market. Some data place the numbers of unemployed veterans to have been as high as seven hundred thousand during the height of the pandemic; however, numbers given by the BLS are lower they do not include data from US territories such as PR, Guam, US Virgin Islands, etc. The American Legion has a resolution that would include data from these US territories.

On Thursday, April 29, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division attended a teleconference at the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors to discuss assisting a survivor attending Arizona State University.

On Thursday, April 29, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division had conversations with the University of Phoenix, National Association of State Approving Agencies (NASAA) executive officers and State Approving Agencies (SAAs) on the Risk-Based Survey Model (RBS) project and virtual visits.

On Thursday, April 29, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division had a conversation with Council of College and Military Educators (CCME) President on speaking at the

CCME Conference and a virtual visit in Virginia for DOD to observe Risk-Based Survey (RBS) new model.

On Thursday, April 29, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division worked with George W. Bush Institute National Task Force on Education policy workgroup to discuss policy positions and potential meetings with stakeholders across the country.

On Thursday, April 29, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division met with representatives of the Veterans Small Business Office to discuss the Restaurant Revitalization Fund. The American Rescue Plan Act established the Restaurant Revitalization Fund to provide funding to help restaurants and other eligible businesses keep their doors open. For the first 21 days the portal opens, the SBA will prioritize and fund applications for small businesses owned by veterans and other economically disadvantaged individuals.

On Friday, April 30, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division had conversations with Capitol Hill staff on potential apprenticeship and On-The-Job (OJT) legislation as well as technical corrections on Roe/Isaacson Bill.

On Friday, April 30, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division worked with Student Veterans of America (SVA) to meet on Risk-Based Survey model (RBS) work and impact higher education oversight.

On Friday, April 30, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division worked on The Veterans Advisory Committee on Education (VACOE) Committee schedule for subcommittee meetings plans for a Fall meeting of full committee.

On Friday, April 30, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division attended weekly meetings with EdCounsel and Lumina Risk Based Survey Executive Team to discuss Risk Based Survey (RBS) challenges to include needed forms and virtual RBS visits.

On Friday, April 30, the National Veterans Employment and Education Division spoke with the Department of Labor about developments in the Troops to Teachers program. VE&E staff requested DOL's insight on the matter given DOL's long history of supporting state-based employment grants.

GLOSSARY OF FREQUENTLY USED ABBREVIATIONS

ACE: American Council on Education

ACP: American Corporate Partners, a veteran's support organization

ATLAS: Accessing Telehealth through Local Area Stations, a V.A. telehealth initiative

BLS: Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics

C&P: V.A.'s Compensation and Pension exam

CAVC: Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims

CCME: Council of College and Military Educators

COLA: Cost-of-living adjustment

CSAAVE: California State Approving Agency for Veterans Education

DIMO: Defense Security Cooperation Agency/Defense Institute for Medical Operations

DOD: Department of Defense

DOL-VETS: Department of Labor, Veterans Employment and Training Services

EdCounsel: Higher education consulting firm

EIDL program. SBA's Economic Injury Disaster Loans
EIDL: Economic Injury Disaster Loan
GAO: Government Accountability Office
GPD: V.A.'s Grant and Per Diem Program for homeless veterans
GWB: George W. Bush Higher Education Policy Work Group
HEROES ACT of 2003: Higher Education Relief Opportunities for Students Act of 2003. Grants the Secretary of Education the authority to waive requirements that impede military borrowers' access to critical repayment protection during the war, military operation, or national emergency.
HVAC: House Veterans Affairs Committee
MCAI: American Legion's Military Credentialing Advancement Initiative
MSLP: The Federal Reserve's Main Street Lending Program
MSO: Military Support Organization
NAICU: National Association of Independent Colleges & Universities
NASAA: National Association of State Approving Agencies. Responsible for approving school funding for GI Bill
NAVPA: National Association of Veterans Program Administrators
NCA: V.A.'s National Cemetery Administration
NDAA: National Defense Authorization Act
NLD: American Legion's National Legislative Division
OPM: Office of Personnel Management
PPP: Paycheck Protection Program
RBS: Risk-Based Survey Model
RPIC: Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge
S2S: Service to School, a veteran's organization
SAA: State Approving Agency, responsible for approving school funding for GI Bill
SBA: Small Business Administration
STEM: Science, Technology, Engineering, Medical
SVA: Student Veterans of America, a veteran's organization
SVAC Senate Veterans Affairs Committee
TAPS: Transition Assistance Program for Survivors, a nonprofit for Gold Star Families
TEAM Act: Senate Bill 4393, to improve the provision of health care for veterans who were exposed to toxic substances from burn pits
TFA: American Legion's Temporary Financial Assistance program
USAID: United States Agency for International Development
USDA: United States Department of Agriculture
USERRA: Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act
VA&R: American Legion's Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Division
VACO: Veterans Affairs Central Office
VBA: V.A.'s Veterans Benefits Administration
VE&E: Veterans Employment and Education Division
VES: Veterans Education Success, a veteran's organization
VSO: Veterans Service Organization

TOPIC 3a: TRACKING LEGISLATION

GI Bill Repair Act of 2020: To extend to black veterans of World War II, their surviving spouses, and direct descendants' eligibility for specific housing and educational assistance programs administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs

Resolution No.: [None on file](#)

Status: Currently on hold, has not been introduced

Homeless Veteran Coronavirus Response Act: The bill allows V.A. to use existing funds for a broader range of services; authorizes the Department to collaborate with outside organizations to facilitate shelters on its properties; loosens restrictions on Grant and Per Diem (GPD) payments and requires V.A. to ensure veterans participating in V.A. homeless programs have access to V.A. telehealth services.

[Resolution No. 326: Support Funding for Additional Housing for Homeless Veterans with Families](#)

H.R.492: To amend title 38, United States Code, make permanent the Secretary of Veterans Affairs's authority to provide financial assistance for supportive services for very low-income veteran families in permanent housing.

[Resolution No. 340: Support Permanent Authorization for the Supportive Services for Veteran Families \(SSVF\) Program](#)

HR 1615: The American Legion supports legislation that would streamline and improve the verification process for veteran-owned small businesses and veteran-owned small businesses.

Status: Passed House Vote, received in the Senate, and referred to the Committee on Veterans Affairs. It did not pass by the end of the 116th Session, will need to be reintroduced.

HR 2224: To direct the Secretary of Labor to prioritize services to homeless veterans with dependent children in carrying out homeless veterans' reintegration programs and for other purposes.

Status: Did not pass by the end of the 116th Session.

HR 1196, Jobs for Veterans Act of 2019: This bill allows an increased work opportunity tax credit for employers who hire veterans who have been certified as discharged or released from active duty in the Armed Forces after September 11, 2001, and who begin working for the employer after December 31, 2019, and before January 1, 2024. This increased credit is in addition to any work opportunity tax credit allowed to a veteran with a service-connected disability.

[Resolution No. 354: Work Opportunity Tax Credit Program](#)

HR 7010, Paycheck Protection Program Flexibility Act of 2020: This bill significantly changes the PPP loans' terms to be more advantageous to small businesses. Including more flexibility in applying the loan to other expenses besides payroll and benefits and extending the time frame for expending the loan.

Status: Became Public Law No: 116-142.

HR 4625: To require education programs to be approved by the V.A. to abide by the Principles of Excellence to include a ban on deceptive or misleading recruiting, clear information about total costs and program requirements, accommodation for deployments, ensuring a point of contact for veterans, and not being under a punitive action by an accreditor.

[Resolution No. 318: Ensuring the Quality of Servicemember and Veteran Student's Education at Institutions of Higher Education](#)

Status: Became Public Law No: 116-315

HR 6957: To direct the Secretaries of Defense and Veterans Affairs to treat a period of full-time National Guard duty, performed in response to the national emergency declared on March 13, 2020, by the President concerning COVID-19, as not shorter than 90 days.

[Resolution No.: Currently studying for appropriate resolution.](#)

HR 4920, Department of Veterans Affairs Contracting Preference Consistency Act of 2020:

This is a bill that would allow AbilityOne companies to keep their preferential treatment at the Department of Veteran Affairs after 2016 with some compromises. The Senate initially sent it back to the House after it was passed for changes. Those changes have been reconciled, and the bill cleared its last hurdle before it is sent to the White House.

S. 2594: To amend title 5, United States Code, to modify specific requirements concerning service and retirement for veterans' Preference for federal hiring.

S. 3745, Coronavirus Emergency Borrower Defense (E-BD) Act: To require the Department of Education to grant total student loan discharges to three specific emergency categories of defrauded borrowers—specifically borrowers covered by:

- (1) Department of Education findings against Corinthian.
- (2) Department of Education findings against ITT Tech; and
- (3) State attorneys general group discharge applications made before the date of enactment.

[Resolution No. 82: Preserve Veteran and Servicemember Rights to Gainful Employment and Borrower Defense Protections](#)

Status: Did not pass 116th Session.

TOPIC 3b: ACTION TAKEN ON LEGISLATION

Building Credit Access for Veterans Act: A bill to require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out a pilot program to establish an automated process for obtaining alternative credit rating information and other purposes.

Status: Draft Bill / Letter of Support submitted on October 13

HR 8426: Protecting Apprenticeship Training for Veterans Act: Currently, veterans must meet a minimum number of apprenticeship hours to receive their Housing Allowance. Due to pandemic work shortages, veterans in those programs now face a reduction or suspension in their stipend. This would allow veteran apprentices who were laid off to roll over excess hours from a previous month to meet the hourly requirement.

[Resolution: Resolution No. 25: Support and Expand Apprenticeship Opportunities for Servicemembers](#)

Status: Letter of Support drafted

HR 4941, Veteran Employment Transition Act” or the “VET Act”: Was sponsored by Representative Andy Kim. The bill's last action was in the House on 12/02/2019; it was referred to the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity. The bill's goal is to improve the Transition Assistance Program. The bill would allow certain veterans' service organizations to contact veterans regarding benefits and better inform veterans of employment opportunities. The Service groups would inform veterans of the benefits and employment opportunities with the Federal, State, and local governments. The groups inform veterans of events in the area.

[Resolution No. 70: Improve Transition Assistance Program](#)

Status: Letter of Support submitted

HR 7003: Is a bill sponsored by Rep. Takano, Mark D-CA-41, and was introduced 05/22/2020. The bill would authorize a pilot program in the Department of Defense to enhance efforts to provide job placement assistance and related employment services directly to the National Guard, Reserves,

and veterans of the Armed Forces. The last action on the bill was 05/22/2020 and referred to the Committee on Armed Services.

[Resolution No. 81: Transition Assistance Program Employment Workshops for National Guard and Reserve Members](#)

Status: Pending Letter of Support

Draft Bill: Veterans Educational Assistance Transparency and Accountability Improvement Act, improve the G.I. Bill Comparison Tool ensures veterans, servicemembers, and their families are better informed when choosing what educational institution is best for them.

Status: Letter of Support submitted

Draft Bill: JSF - To amend title 38, United States Code, to clarify the scope of procedural rights of members of the uniformed services concerning employment and reemployment rights and other purposes.

Status: We submitted written testimony for the July 23, 2020 hearing.

Draft Bill: USERRA Protections for State Active Duty - To amend title 38, United States Code, extend particular employment and reemployment rights to members of the National Guard who perform State active duty. Submitted written testimony to the Legislative Division.

Status: We submitted written testimony for the July 23, 2020 hearing.

HR 7111, Veterans Economic Recovery Act of 2020: Require the Secretary of V.A. to carry out a rapid retraining program that provides eligible veterans up to 12 months of retraining assistance for in-demand occupations. These 12 months of benefits would be equivalent to students' and schools' payments through the Post 9/11 GI Bill.

[Resolution No. 316: Support Employment of Veterans in the Public and Private Workforce](#)

Status: This bill was submitted for the July 23, 2020 testimony.

HR 7445: To expand eligibility for home loans from the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to individual members of the Armed Forces reserve components.

[Resolution No. 329: Support Home Loan Guaranty Program](#)

Status: This bill was submitted for the July 23, 2020 testimony.

H.R. 711, West Los Angeles VA Campus Improvement Act of 2021: This legislation would direct the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) West Los Angeles Medical Center campus to use revenues from leases and easements as a dedicated funding source to build additional housing for homeless veterans, offset the high costs of housing construction, and help fund the provision of supportive services for veterans in the community.

[Resolution No. 141: Department of Veterans Affairs Enhanced-Use Leasing](#)

Status: This bill was submitted for the April 21, 2021 testimony.

H.R. 2082, VA Supply Chain Resiliency Act: To make certain improvements relating to the supply chain of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

[Resolution No. 13: Support "Buy American" Policy within the Federal Government to Create Opportunities for Veterans](#)

Status: This bill was submitted for the April 21, 2021 testimony.

TOPIC 4: EMPLOYMENT



The labor market is rebounding, with fewer workers being laid off and hiring picking up as states lift Covid-19 restrictions. Photo: Alexi Rosenfeld/Getty Images

Jobless claims fell again to the lowest level since the pandemic took hold more than a year ago, another sign the labor market is rebounding this spring.

Initial unemployment claims, a proxy for layoffs, fell by 13,000 last week to a seasonally adjusted 553,000, the Labor Department said on Thursday. The previous week's figure was revised up to 566,000. The latest reading marked the third straight week jobless claims were below 600,000, their lowest levels since early 2020. The four-week moving average, which smooths out volatility in the weekly figures, was 611,750, also a pandemic low.

New claims this month are well below the millions of claims filed weekly a year ago, but still more than double the roughly 200,000 weekly applications submitted in the months before the pandemic began.

Fewer workers being laid off comes as hiring is picking up, with states lifting restrictions on gatherings at restaurants, baseball stadiums and tourist venues, and Americans, who are increasingly vaccinated against Covid-19, becoming more willing to spend time and money outside their homes. Consumer spending is the primary driver of the U.S. economy.

"The labor market looks to be moving in the right direction," said AnnElizabeth Konkel, economist at job search site Indeed.com, noting claims are falling and job openings are rising. "We certainly need further improvement, but with the number of fully vaccinated individuals increasing, the coming months look promising."

U.S. employers added 916,000 jobs in March, and economists surveyed by The Wall Street Journal project robust hiring—better than 500,000 a month—to continue for the next year. While that pace of hiring is more than double the rate in 2019, it would still leave the economy short of replacing all of the jobs lost during the pandemic in the next 12 months. As of March, there were 8.4 million fewer jobs on payrolls compared with February 2020, according to the Labor Department.

There are other signs of a tightening labor market. Some employers are reporting challenges finding available workers and larger employers are raising wages.

Amazon.com Inc. said Wednesday that more than 500,000 of its employees would see pay increases of between 50 cents and \$3 an hour. Walmart Inc. and Costco Wholesale Corp. announced broad pay raises earlier this year.

The decrease in benefit applications indicates that more employers are holding on to workers and those who are jobless are increasingly finding opportunities.

“We’re no longer adding to the hole, which is a good sign for the recovery,” said Nela Richardson, chief economist at human-resources software firm Automatic Data Processing Inc.

The number of new claims peaked above six million last spring. It then fell sharply and plateaued between 700,000 and 900,000 for most of the fall and winter. Dr. Richardson, a Ph.D. labor economist, said a concerning sign then was seeing some who lost jobs early in the pandemic applying again after a short return to employment. The renewed downward trend in claims suggests a more sustained healing is under way, she said.

While the level of new applications is falling, the number of Americans receiving unemployment benefits remains elevated. About 16.6 million workers were receiving benefits on the week ended April 10 through one of several programs, including regular state aid and federal emergency programs put in place in response to the pandemic. While that figure, which isn’t adjusted for seasonality, was down from the prior week, it was well above the near two million before the pandemic began.

A coronavirus relief package enacted in March expanded eligibility for extended unemployment benefits until September and continued a \$300-a-week enhancement to the amount authorized by states.

Unemployment benefits typically expire after six months or less, depending on state policies. Federal extensions will allow some to receive payments for about 18 months.

Some economists say the extended and enhanced benefits have provided a disincentive for workers to return to work, particularly positions that pay lower wages. Others say the payments have provided income support to those who can’t return to work because of child-care responsibilities or don’t have the skills for jobs in growing sectors such as logistics or construction.

[Reported by Edwin Cruz]

TOPIC 5: EDUCATION



The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is launching the Veteran application for the [Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program \(VRRAP\)](#) on May 3, 2021. The application will be available on [VA.gov](#) with additional details including a link to be announced closer to launch.

The Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program (VRRAP), was enacted on March 11, 2021, and was effective, immediately. VRRAP was part of the American Rescue Plan, a \$1.9 trillion economic stimulus package, with aid targeted to assist individuals and businesses recover from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Eligible Veterans participating in VRRAP receive up to 12 months of tuition and fees and a monthly housing allowance based on Post-9/11 GI Bill rates. Covered education programs must provide training for [high-demand occupations](#), which is determined by the Commissioner of Labor Statistics. GI Bill approved programs of education, excluding bachelor's and graduate degrees, and VET TEC approved training are eligible. VA has **17,250 training spots** open for eligible Veterans.

How does the program work? VA will enter into participation agreements with organizations (referred to as "Educational Institutions") that provide training and job placement outcomes. VA will incentivize these partners with a "pay-for-performance" model that pays these institutions incrementally based on the progress and success of their students.

For a program of education to qualify for VRRAP, it must meet the following criteria:

- Be approved for GI Bill or VET TEC
 - Not lead to a bachelors or graduate degree
 - Provide training for a high-demand occupation
- The payment model for VRRAP tuition and fees (paid directly to the participant's educational institutions) is milestone based:

- 50% when the Veteran begins the program
- 25% when the Veteran completes the program
- 25% when the Veteran finds employment in the field of study

VA continues to partner with educational institutions to participate in VRRAP, and asks that Legion and other VSOs share information on [VRRAP](#) with interested organizations in your community. While participation is voluntary, this is a great opportunity to support Veterans seeking retraining and employment opportunities in response to the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic.

[Reported by John Kamin]

TOPIC 6: VETERAN HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS



The Department of Veteran Affairs is knee-deep in several major IT modernization efforts, but sometimes seemingly small enhancements make the biggest, immediate impact.

VA made several upgrades to its Status Query and Response System (SQUARES) during the pandemic, which is allowing the agency to connect homeless veterans with services more quickly than ever before.

SQUARES is a cloud-based application that gives both VA homelessness program employees and external service providers — such as shelters, food banks, state and local organizations and non-profits — a place to verify a veteran’s identity and eligibility.

Previously, veterans had to provide their proof of service before they could begin to receive VA services through the department’s homelessness program, said Thomas Guido, senior director of VA’s digital transformation center.

“Most veterans would not have [documentation] that on them. This process could take up to two months to actually identify the veteran and check for their eligibility for different programs,” he said in an interview. “That’s really the big change. [With] this system now, that can be done in minutes. It takes about 10 minutes directly at the service provider’s site.”

The application integrates with the Master Veteran Index and the VA-DoD Identity Repository, meaning SQUARES users can access those databases in one place.

The department also built eligibility rules into the system itself, eliminating the need for a subject matter expert to manually apply VA rules to determine whether a veteran can receive specific services, Guido said.

“There’s much more going on than just providing access to the data,” he said. “It’s actually packaging that in a way that’s most useful in a very streamlined and intuitive way for those providers.”

VA first developed SQUARES several years ago, and the department’s digital transformation service has released several updates since. But those upgrades took on new meaning during the pandemic.

“Certainly there was economic and housing strain, especially for vulnerable populations with the pandemic, so changes and updates were made to support referrals to some of those additional services and programs — and also identify where resources are available,” Guido said. “It’s bidirectional. This isn’t just about checking identify and eligibility. It’s about the referrals and also tailoring the services for the individual, the veteran that needs them, based on what their current situation is and the resources that are available.”

Combatting veteran homelessness has been a priority for both VA and the Department of Housing and Urban Development since 2010, when the two agencies formed a joint partnership to tackle the challenge. The two agencies managed to reduce veteran homelessness by 47% between 2010 and 2016.

But according to the most recent assessment from HUD, there were 37,252 veterans experiencing homelessness across the United States on a single night in January 2020, a slight uptick over 2019’s numbers.

The uptick is concerning to VA Secretary Denis McDonough and HUD Secretary Marcia Fudge, who, earlier this spring, announced plans to review and update their homelessness strategies. Both secretaries said they would mobilize the strengths of their departments to end veteran homelessness.

For Guido, that’s where VA’s digital transformation center can play a role.

“A lot of times, IT folks are disconnected from the front lines. We watch television. We watch front line workers and first responders dealing with situations, and the commitment and the courage and everything that goes into that,” he said. “I’m not suggesting that we’re feeling that or living that. But it’s our opportunity ... as IT professionals to own some of that responsibility. We’re the ones who are enabling those first responders or front line workers. We’re putting the tools in their hands so they can more effectively deliver the services. That’s something that we’re trying to impart on the team, that same sense of commitment [and] urgency. This isn’t IT for IT’s sake.”

SQUARES has grown during the pandemic to accommodate more users, more than 2,100 VA employees and partners today compared to 1,000 a year ago.

The SQUARES dashboard allows them to see local data, the number of requests, hotspots, which organizations are seeing the most activity and what types of services are being provided or are in most need.

“That’s why this expansion is so important, expanding the footprint of the application,” Guido said. “The more organizations that are using, the more complete that picture becomes.”

The department also made improvements to the SQUARES user interface, allowing VA service partners to access the platform on any device. VA service providers can also automatically onboard more of their own users and give them easy access to the application.

SAAS, LOW-CODE SOLUTIONS KEY TO VA PANDEMIC RESPONSE

VA uses a low-code Salesforce platform to power SQUARES. Guido said software-as-a-service solutions and low-code or no-code platforms have been the key to delivering, modifying and updating applications, like SQUARES, over the last year.

VA’s Office of Information and Technology has been busy during the pandemic, building new applications or modifying others to respond to an ever-evolving list of needs from employees on the front lines. The department, for example, deployed a chat bot to correspond with veterans about their COVID questions.

It also developed a new dashboard to track vaccinations among VA employees, contractors and volunteers, Guido said.

The digital transformation center has delivered at least 30 COVID-19 related applications since the pandemic started, Guido said. It modified another 20 to meet pandemic-specific requirements.

“We’re averaging about 92 days to production on the platform, which is very fast compared to some historical, custom-developed-type projects,” he said. “That’s really allowing us to not only get products out in the hands of the users quickly, but also we can then continue to iterate on them and make changes quickly, month over month, as quickly as two weeks or faster if we need to. As policy changes and as situations unfold similar to the COVID-19 pandemic response, we can make those changes on the fly as needed.”

As is the case with SQUARES, sometimes it’s as easy as connecting the dots and pulling previously disparate pieces together to make a difference, Guido said.

“That data was there before. Those legacy systems were there. Those authoritative sources were there,” he added. “But look at the significant or the very meaningful change that that had on that program, just by adding that app. That’s what we’re trying to do, create those connections [and] fill in the gaps where apps add really the most value.”

[Reported by Edwin Cruz]

TOPIC 7: SMALL BUSINESS



*Placards on tables in a New York restaurant remind diners of social-distancing protocols in December 2020.
Photo: Richard B. Levine/Zuma Press*

RESTAURANTS CAN TAP \$29 BILLION COVID-19 AID PROGRAM BEGINNING MAY 3

The Small Business Administration's grant program for the food-service industry was created by Congress as part of a pandemic-aid package.

The Small Business Administration will begin accepting applications May 3 for a \$29 billion grant program aimed at boosting the restaurant industry, according to the agency.

The program, officially known as the Restaurant Revitalization Fund, is the first federal pandemic aid exclusively for restaurants, bars and other food-service businesses. It was authorized by Congress as part of its \$1.9 trillion coronavirus-aid package that became law last month, and will be a key source of aid to an industry that has been hard hit by the pandemic.

Restaurants and bars reported sales of \$659 billion last year, down by nearly a quarter from 2019, according to the National Restaurant Association. More than 110,000 bars and restaurants closed at least temporarily, according to the trade group's estimates.

Restaurant owners lobbied Congress for months for dedicated funding for the industry, arguing that restrictions imposed on in-person dining to curb the virus's spread harmed their ability to do business.

Grant recipients are eligible to receive funding equivalent to their pandemic-related revenue loss, up to \$10 million per business, according to the SBA website. A single physical location can receive no more than \$5 million.

Interested businesses can begin registering for the grant application portal on Friday, April 30, and applications will open at noon EST on the following Monday, according to the SBA. The agency earlier this month said it was testing the portal to address any technical issues ahead of the initiative's public launch.

For the first 21 days that the program is open, the SBA will prioritize funding applications from Veterans, along with businesses owned and controlled by women and socially and economically disadvantaged individuals. All eligible applicants are encouraged to submit applications as soon as the portal opens. Following the 21 days, all eligible applications will be funded on a first-come, first-served basis.

The online application will remain open to any eligible establishment until all funds are exhausted.

In preparation, the SBA recommends qualifying applicants familiarize themselves with the application process in advance to ensure a smooth and efficient application experience, specifically by:

- Registering for an account in advance at restaurants.sba.gov starting April 30 at 9 a.m. ET.
- Reviewing the official guidance, including program guide, frequently asked questions, and application sample.
- Preparing the required documentation.
- Working with a point-of-sale vendor or visiting restaurants.sba.gov to submit an application when the application portal opens. *[Note: If an applicant is working with a point-of-sale vendor, they do not need to register beforehand on the site.]*

That announcement followed the rocky rollout of a \$16 billion grant program for the live-events industry. The SBA was forced to close applications for the live-venue program shortly after launching on April 8 due to technical glitches. Following efforts to address the issues and additional testing of the application portal, the agency reopened that program on Monday.

The restaurant grants will add to several pandemic-aid programs the SBA is overseeing. The largest of those programs is the popular Paycheck Protection Program, which has approved 5.1 million forgivable loans worth roughly \$248.5 billion to small businesses in 2021, according to SBA data as of April 25.

Beyond restaurants and bars, the SBA is allowing food trucks, caterers, cafes and some distilleries, breweries and inns to apply for the grants. Business owners can have up to 20 locations, and franchisees for major chains may apply. Public companies aren't eligible, nor are live-music venues that have applied for funding through the SBA's program targeting those establishments.

Justin Anthony, co-owner of two bars in Denver, said he had been repeatedly hitting refresh on the SBA's grants portal to make sure he didn't miss out on its opening.

"We have compiled every piece of potential documentation that they could require so we have it at the ready," said Mr. Anthony, who tapped his personal savings to stay afloat during the pandemic. His business partner refinanced her home as sales at their bars fell by more than 60% last year.

Mr. Anthony said he hopes to tap the federal funds to keep going until more customers are fully vaccinated and demand improves.

The grant funds may be used for expenses such as payroll costs, business supplies and construction of outdoor seating.

Restaurant sales have improved from steep declines during the winter, when many states imposed fresh restrictions to try to curb the virus's spread. Still, food businesses have continued to suffer. Nearly 14,200 restaurants closed for good this year through March, according to market-research firm Datassential.

Patrick Kelley, associate administrator of the SBA's Office of Capital Access, said during a recent training with restaurant owners that funding for the grants will likely run out in its first phase without all eligible applicants receiving money. Mr. Kelley said the agency was working to ensure business owners got their grants as quickly as possible without it being distributed irresponsibly.

"The guiding principle is that the most amount of relief goes to as many businesses in as short amount of time," Mr. Kelley said.

If funding is exhausted, Congress would need to allocate additional money for the program to continue.

The SBA has said it would process and fund certain priority groups through the first 21 days of the grant program. Those groups include businesses that are majority owned by women, veterans or people who are socially and economically disadvantaged. Following the priority period, the agency will fund other applications on a first-come, first-served basis.

The SBA earlier announced a new type of partnership to allow businesses to use their point-of-sale service providers to fill applications for the grant program. The collaborating providers are Clover, NCR Corp., Square and Toast.

SBA Administrator Isabel Guzman in a statement said the partnerships are an effort "to meet small businesses where they are, instead of waiting for them to come to us."

[Reported by Edwin Cruz]

TOPIC 8: CAREER FAIRS

Virtual Job Fair

May 20, 2021, 1pm - 5pm

VIRTUAL JOB FAIR-FOCUS ON SECURITY, LAW ENFORCEMENT, CYBERSECURITY

1-3pm: Reserved for candidates who have active security clearances

3-5pm: Open to all job seekers

Presented by [JobZone](#)

[More information](#)



THE AMERICAN LEGION

VIRTUAL CAREER FAIR



JUNE 10, 2021



10am - 11am Central: Honoring Women Veterans with a 1 hour early entry

11am - 3pm Central: Open to all Transitioning Service Members, Veterans, Military Spouses and their dependents.

Job Seeker Registration:

<https://tinyurl.com/3j5td23a>



Employer Registration:

<https://tinyurl.com/recshb>



The American Legion's National Veterans Employment & Education Commission's Mission is to take actions that affect veterans' economic well-being, including issues relating to veterans' education, employment, home loans, vocational rehabilitation, homelessness, and small business.

[Reported by Edwin Cruz]

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Week Ending: 4/30/2021