

Washington, D.C. - Rep. Peter Welch (VT-AL) testified before the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs today on legislation he introduced last week to assist veterans with finding employment after leaving the military.

Welch's legislation, H.R. 6272, reauthorizes the Service Members Occupational Conversion and Training Act of 1992.

"This program was authorized throughout the 1990s to assist veterans in finding employment after their military careers. Our veterans deserve this program today," Welch said in his testimony. "It is a simple pact we have made with our troops and one we are obligated to fulfill: after they have sacrificed to serve our country on the battlefield, we must do all we can to serve them here at home."

Welch added, "We need to ensure that veterans are as equipped to compete for jobs in the economy as they were trained to defeat our adversaries in combat."

The program reimburses employers for training recently retired service members for stable and permanent positions. It also funds assessments, developing of training plans, and providing supportive services for the veteran.

According to a 2008 Bureau of Labor Statistics report, 18 to 54 year old veterans leaving the military after September 11 had a higher unemployment rate (6.5 percent) than did non-veterans (4.7 percent) in 2006. The unemployment rate was even higher (7.5 percent) for veterans ages 25 to 34, compared with non-veterans in the same age group (4.6 percent).

Welch's full committee statement is below:

Statement of Congressman Peter Welch

Testimony Before the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

June 19, 2008

Thank you Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin, Ranking Member Boozman, and members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify on behalf of H.R. 6272, the SMOCTA Reauthorization Act, authorizing discretionary appropriations to carry out the Service Members Occupational Conversion and Training Act of 1992.

The SMOCTA program was authorized throughout the 1990s to assist veterans in finding employment after their military careers. Our veterans deserve this program today.

This important program was originally established to respond to the needs of veterans who had been hurt by the downsizing of the military, especially personnel whose specialty did not have direct applicability in the civilian employment market. Specifically, veterans eligible for assistance were those with military occupations that were not transferable into the private sector; those that were unemployed for a long period of time; and those with a 30 percent or greater service-connected disability.

SMOCTA reimbursed employers to offset their cost of training recently separated service members for stable and permanent positions that involve significant training, usually lasting between 6 and 18 months. Besides the reimbursements to employers, SMOCTA provided funds for assessments, development of training plans, and supportive services for the trainee. In exchange for this assistance, employers guaranteed jobs for veterans.

According to the Paralyzed Veterans of America, SMOCTA was considered one of the better programs to serve transitioning military personnel.

Today, with a tough economy and the high demands we place on our veterans, the rationale for reestablishing SMOCTA is stronger than ever.

According to a May, 2008 Bureau of Labor Statistics report, Gulf War-era II veterans aged 18 to 54 years had a higher unemployment rate (6.5 percent) than did non-veterans (4.7 percent) in 2006. In addition, at 7.5 percent in 2006, the unemployment rate of Gulf War-era II veterans aged 25 to 34 years was higher than the 2006 unemployment rate of non-veterans in the same age group (4.6 percent).

As disturbing as those figures are, the situation will likely only become more dire for new veterans. More and more of those who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan will return home as civilians, and they will find an economy that is on the brink - an economy that just experienced its sharpest one-month increase in unemployment in 22 years, to 5.5 percent in May from 5 percent in April.

If you serve your country in the military, you should have the opportunity to return home, find a job, have a career, and support your family. Our brave men and women in uniform have given us so much. They deserve to come home with the support necessary to provide for themselves and for their families that have already sacrificed so much.

It is our job, as Members of Congress, to make sure that our nation lives up to its commitment to our veterans. It is a simple pact we have made with our troops - and one we are obligated to fulfill: After they have sacrificed to serve our country on the battlefield, we must do all we can to serve them here at home.

A reauthorization of SMOCTA could not be more timely. Simply put, more troops are coming home from battle at a time when there are fewer jobs for American workers. In addition, the global economy is becoming more and more complex and demanding of new skills. We know our troops possess the work ethic, the intelligence, and the discipline to succeed in any environment, from the battlefield to the boardroom. As Members of Congress, we need to ensure that veterans are as equipped to compete for jobs in the economy as they were trained to defeat our adversaries in combat.

SMOCTA reauthorization has the support of many of the Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), including the American Legion and Paralyzed Veterans of America, and the National Association of State Workforce Agencies.

I thank the Subcommittee for your consideration of this important legislation and am happy to answer any questions you may have.