

SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 287

Encouraging the Virginia Department of Veterans Services and the Virginia State Approving Agency to develop and implement new processes by which flight training and aircraft maintenance training schools in Virginia can adjust student for veterans pricing based on market conditions.

Agreed to by the Senate, February 6, 2023

Agreed to by the House of Delegates, February 23, 2023

WHEREAS, since 1944, the GI Bill has helped qualifying veterans and their family members get money to cover all or some of the costs for school or training, including flight training; and

WHEREAS, flight training is considerably more expensive than most other funded training, which has historically attracted a small percentage of unscrupulous operators to target veterans by offering flight training in overly expensive aircraft or through deceptive financing scams; and

WHEREAS, to prevent abuse of veterans and misuse of U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) funds, the VA sought and was able to enact federal legislation to support review and control processes; and

WHEREAS, over time these control processes have become increasingly cumbersome and are now blocking legitimate aviation training opportunities from being available to the nation's veterans; to offer VA-funded training, a Virginia flight school must submit an application to the Virginia State Approving Agency (SAA) to gain approval for adding locations, adding training programs, or to change the rates they charge for their training services; the SAA reviews the application, then sends a letter to the VA with their determination and recommended approvals; and

WHEREAS, typically, the VA follows the SAA recommendations and issues a Web Enabled Approval Management System (WEAMS) document to the applying school; only at that time, may the school begin to train VA-funded students at a new location, offer training to VA-funded students in new programs, or begin to charge rates that they had been charging to non-VA funded patrons during the WEAMS approval process; and

WHEREAS, this approval process has traditionally taken between two and six months, or longer; and

WHEREAS, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and supply chain issues, all aspects related to operating a flight school have become more expensive, including the cost of fuel, parts for maintenance of aircraft, and other consumable supplies; and

WHEREAS, in addition to a pilot shortage, the United States is experiencing an equal shortage of aircraft maintenance technicians with Federal Aviation Administration aircraft and power frame (A&P) certifications; and

WHEREAS, all VA-approved flight schools in the Commonwealth are located near airline, charter, or military maintenance shops, and these maintenance facilities are feverishly attempting to recruit mechanics with A&P certification; mechanics holding this certification are also in great demand by non-aviation organizations, further depleting the available workforce to aviation facilities; and

WHEREAS, the current economic environment continues to drive industry costs up with no relief in sight; pricing changes occur as often as multiple times in the same week, based on both fuel, supply chain, and other market conditions, but VA-approved schools are contractually bound to charge only approved rates for VA-funded services; and

WHEREAS, the length of the VA and SAA approval process for price increases can make teaching VA-funded students unprofitable; the process is not reactive to existing market conditions, placing an undue burden on private sector schools and resulting in a loss of employment training opportunities for veterans; and

WHEREAS, most of the 66 public-use airports in the Commonwealth have at least one flight school at the airport, but counting the two university programs, there are only seven Virginia flight schools with approval to accept VA-funding; and

WHEREAS, the pilot and maintainer shortage is having a significant impact on the nation's ability to respond to and recover from shortages, and while veterans are a preferred source of pilots and maintainers for airlines and charter companies, the length of the VA and SAA approval process is continuously eroding flight training opportunities for veterans in the Commonwealth; and

WHEREAS, to address this critical issue, the VA and SAA should increase staffing to ensure timely approvals or establish rules that provide schools with the ability to adjust pricing based on a formula, as opposed to exact approved pricing; and

WHEREAS, such rules would reduce the excessive administrative burden involved with applying for WEAMS updates, increasing efficiency and allowing the SAA to reduce staffing required to approve pricing requests and processing of each WEAMS application, and random audits would ensure

compliance with any such pricing formula; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the Senate, the House of Delegates concurring, That the Virginia Department of Veterans Services and the Virginia State Approval Agency be encouraged to develop and implement new processes by which flight training and aircraft maintenance training schools in Virginia can adjust student pricing for veterans based on market conditions; and, be it

RESOLVED FURTHER, That the Clerk of the Senate transmit copies of this resolution to the Virginia Department of Veterans Services and the Virginia State Approval Agency, requesting that they further disseminate copies of this resolution to their respective constituents so that they may be apprised of the sense of the General Assembly of Virginia in this matter.