

Statement of Senator Bernie Sanders, Chairman
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Hearing: Preserving the Rights of Servicemembers, Veterans and
Their Families in the Financial Marketplace

July 31, 2013

Good morning and welcome to today's hearing. Earlier this year, this Committee heard from nearly all of the veterans service organizations about the challenges impacting the veterans' community. In response, the Members of this Committee, both Democratic and Republican, worked hard to put forward a number of ideas to address these challenges.

I am proud to say that just last week, this Committee met and ordered reported a number of bills to address many of the issues outlined by the VSO's earlier this year.

The hard work, however, does not end there. There is another important issue within the jurisdiction of this committee we need to address, and that is the reason we are here today.

When men and women volunteer to serve in the Armed Forces, they should do so knowing Congress will do all it can to support their efforts. We must ensure their financial and other civil obligations are not negatively impacted by such service.

For this reason, Congress enacted the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act. The purpose of this law is clearly laid out in the Act itself –

- It provides protections to enable servicemembers to devote their focus to the defense needs of this nation.
- It does so by temporarily suspending certain proceedings and transactions that may adversely affect the civil rights of servicemembers during military service.

Today, we will take a look at compliance with and enforcement of existing protections. We will have an opportunity to hear from witnesses on the front lines of this effort.

I remain deeply troubled by the violations of the SCRA that occurred within the mortgage lending industry within the past few years. In a 2012 report, the Government Accountability Office identified –

- Over 15,000 instances of financial institutions failing to properly reduce servicemembers' mortgage interest rates; and
- Over 300 improper foreclosures.

These violations are completely unacceptable. Unfortunately, the challenges faced by our servicemembers do not end there. The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau has identified similar practices and concerns within the student loan servicing market.

This unacceptable behavior must stop –

- We must continue to improve education on the protections of the SCRA;
- Industry must improve its compliance with the Act; and
- Finally, aggressive enforcement of these protections must continue when violations occur.

I firmly believe the brave men and women serving our country should not be subjected to the types of behavior we have seen in the past. That is why today's discussion about how we can continue to improve and enhance the SCRA is so important.

When servicemembers are sent into harm's way they should serve knowing others are doing all they can to ease their burden.

I also know there are other financial challenges that continue to confront our servicemembers, veterans and their families. All too often, I hear from veterans about scammers targeting their pensions or organizations improperly holding themselves out as an extension of VA.

This Committee has and will continue to work hard to put an end to any improper practices. This year marks the fourth anniversary of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Since 2009, VA has paid more than 30 billion dollars in Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit payments to assist nearly 1 million veterans, servicemembers, and their families pursuing their educations.

Last year, Congress passed the Improving Transparency of Education Opportunity for Veterans Act. Yet, as Mrs. Petraeus's testimony points out, concerns of abuses by some educational institutions puts the individual benefits the Post-9/11 GI Bill provides to veterans at risk.

The Committee has also worked to put an end to improper practices surrounding VA's pension program. I appreciate CFPB's efforts in responding to a request from Senator Murray and other members of this committee during the last Congress. CFPB's increased consumer education within the veteran's community on this issue certainly helps.

I would also like to acknowledge the work of Ranking Member Burr on this issue. Last week, the Committee ordered reported a provision that he worked on that will also help in ensuring VA pension benefits are received by those most in need.

As the war in Afghanistan draws to a close, it is important that we revisit the protections afforded our servicemembers and veterans. We need to learn from the past and ensure we are doing all we can to prepare for the future.

What adjustments are necessary to ensure the rights of the young men and women who will serve our country in the future are adequately protected? This is the question we will work to answer today and moving forward.

I look forward to hearing from each of the witnesses and working with you in the future to ensure our men and women in uniform have the best package of protections possible.

It's another very busy day here in the Senate with a number of other Committee's holding markups this morning as well as a special caucus beginning at 11:15. Let me thank Senator Boozman for his willingness to serve as Ranking Member for the day.

Senator Boozman, would you like to make an opening statement?