

America's veterans sacrifice much to serve our nation. They risk life and limb. They spend time away from home and family. They endure the hardships that can occur upon returning to civilian life following active military service.

Our nation has long recognized this sacrifice by offering special veterans benefits such as the G.I. Bill, which helps pay for veterans' education. This wonderful tradition has guided many Americans to levels of educational achievement perhaps not possible otherwise.

But while the G.I. Bill continues to provide outstanding educational opportunities to veterans, not all veterans undertake a path of higher education after their military service. Many veterans have used some benefits, but have not completed a degree.

Many constituents have informed me that they would like to see greater entrepreneurial opportunities available to them as a way of augmenting traditional educational opportunities. At the same time, unemployment figures for our nation's newest veterans are troubling, with 21.6 percent of 18 to 24 year old male veterans from the Post 9/11 era unemployed in 2009.

Many of our veterans possess the drive and skills to become successful entrepreneurs, but simply lack adequate capital to get started. They have learned important, marketable skills during their time in service and often want to use their acquired expertise as a springboard to small business ownership.

To address these issues, I introduced H.R. 114, the Veterans Entrepreneurial Transition Business Benefit Act of 2009. This legislation would permit veterans eligible for assistance under the Montgomery G.I. Bill to elect to use their benefits to establish and operate a business that they will own as a primary source of income. I recently had the pleasure of presenting the merits of this bill directly to the members of the House Veterans Affairs Committee and its Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity. You can view my congressional hearing testimony at <http://Fortenberry.house.gov>

Allowing veterans to use their educational benefits as capital to start a business, combined with the exceptional counseling and training programs for veterans in small business that already exist with the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Small Business Administration, would propel many veterans toward economic independence. The Paralyzed Veterans of America agree, and support this bill. While the bill is clear in its intent, it is also deliberately brief in order to allow the Secretary of Defense operational flexibility in implementing and managing the program.

This initiative is another step toward increasing the diversity of opportunities for veterans to use their earned benefits while strengthening the small business economy, creating jobs, and encouraging innovation, the very intent of the G.I. Bill. Those who have devoted so much of their lives for the good of America have rightfully earned the chance to fully pursue engaging and successful careers following their military service.