

**Testimony of
Trustee William Withrow
Peralta Community College District Board of Trustees
Before the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
House Veterans' Affairs Committee
March 17, 2015**

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to present testimony on the efforts of the Peralta Community College District to assist with the education of our nation's veterans and their families. My name is William Withrow, and I am a member of the Peralta Board of Trustees. I was asked by our board President, Meredith Brown, to represent the District today as I am a veteran and a retired officer of the United States Navy. I served on active duty for over 24 years. I am pleased to have this chance to discuss all the programs Peralta has created to assist our veteran population.

Peralta Community College District is comprised of four colleges -- College of Alameda, Merritt College, Laney College and Berkeley City College -- located in the San Francisco East Bay Community. The four colleges serve over 30,000 students. The Peralta Community College District provides accessible, high quality educational programs and services to meet the needs of our urban, multi-cultural communities. The colleges and the District take pride in supporting the educational needs of veterans through a comprehensive array of programs and services.

The Bay Area has a significant veterans population. The VA estimates that the area serves over 266,000 vets. Many of these were recently discharged from military service. They come to Northern California for employment opportunities as well as for the quality of life.

A number of veterans attend our four colleges. However, not all of them take advantage of the GI educational benefits. The cost of community colleges is quite low in California. It costs only \$46 per credit at Peralta. Thus, many veterans choose not to use their veterans' benefits while attending our colleges, saving them for when they transfer to the more expensive University of California, California State Universities or private colleges. For example, the VA's GI Bill Comparison Tool identifies 144 veterans attending Berkeley City College. By our count there are over 260. But while some veterans are not using their benefits while they are with us, Peralta still provides special help and assistance for them.

Some of these services include the following:

- **Academic Credit.** Peralta provides six semester units toward an Associate Degree for military service if the veteran completes an additional twelve units from Peralta's colleges. This is our own initiative, not mandated by the State.
- **Tuition.** Peralta waives out-of-state tuition for the first year when the students establish residency. This has been our policy for all students for years. We note the provisions of Section 702 of the *Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act of 2014* would simplify this process further. I can assure you Peralta will be in compliance.
- **Priority Registration.** Veterans receive priority registration for classes. This is especially important for students enrolled in high demand classes.

- **Guaranteed Access to Counsellors.** This is another important service. Statewide, California does not have sufficient counsellors to properly service its student population. This shortage is an ongoing problem at Peralta as well. However, we ensure that veterans receive priority to academic and mental health counseling. All new veteran students see a veteran's counselor to develop a student education plan and to select their courses.
- **Orientation to College.** Peralta enrolls all new veteran students in a one unit semester-long "Orientation to College" course that introduces them to college life and connects them to the services available to help them succeed. The semester long course ensures that students are supported through those critical first weeks when many students get lost and drop-out.
- **Career Guidance.** To assist veterans with their post-Peralta careers, the Counseling Department offers transfer workshops to ease the transition to four year colleges and universities. The College of Alameda also has a one-stop business and career center which provides free employment services to job seekers and employers. The center offers a variety of services including preparation workshops, employer interviews, career fairs and placement assistance.
- **Dedicated Space.** Finally, at each of our four colleges, we provide dedicated space committed to veterans, to allow them to interact and relate to their peers. This space is for all veterans whether they are using benefits or not. We have also fostered the growth of veterans student clubs.

Suggested Improvements

As you can see, Peralta values our veteran students, and provides services to them to make their experience successful. But we have some suggestions on ways to make the existing veterans education programs better.

First, there needs to be more recognition and support for "remediation" classes. At Peralta, we prefer to use the term "developmental". Overall, Mr. Chairman, over 70 percent of students enrolling at Peralta need some level of developmental education to get up to college level standards. Veterans benefits cover 6 hours for developmental courses that are non-credit. Quite frankly more is needed. Many students, especially veterans who may have been out of school for awhile, need more than 6 hours to begin taking credit courses.

Second, we recommend providing more institutional resources for colleges to be able to support their veteran populations. At present, each of our four colleges tracks veteran students at their respective institutions. A district-wide position, Dean of Equity and Student Success, has just been created that will provide a centralized way of tracking the progress of veteran students. Peralta is funding this position out of its own resources. We believe that the VA should provide it instead, at Peralta and other colleges. This would guarantee that colleges can provide essential services to help their veteran students succeed.

Finally, we encourage the military services and VA to provide more transition support for veterans who are discharged from active duty. We have found that students often struggle to make the adjustment to civilian life and preparation for post-secondary education. Many suffer

from emotional trauma from their active duty experiences and many do not understand the basics of financial management.

You are aware of the issues, which have been identified previously, but still exist. We commit to working with you to help create programs to address these needs.

In summary, Mr. Chairman, in preparation for this appearance over the last week, I met with a number of our veteran students. I was pleased to find that they are happy at Peralta and are getting a solid base to their educational and career goals. Veterans educational programs are the ultimate win-win situation. Many of the certificate and workforce programs dovetail into the experiences the students had when they were in service, leading to rewarding careers in auto technologies, aviation engineering and allied health services. As I mentioned at the start of my testimony, I served as a Navy officer for 24 years. I took an oath to protect the interests of enlisted personnel. That carries over into my retirement. I am personally dedicated to the well-being of our veteran students and Peralta shares that deep commitment. We look forward to working with this Committee to provide the best educational experiences for our nation's veteran population.