April 13th, 2015

Dear Congressman Gosar,

My name is SrA Christopher Shelby, USAF Reserves. I am writing you this letter to urge you to please consider pushing for a waiver that would allow students that have been accepted into the Aviation program at Yavapai College to receive their rightful education benefits from the VA. On April 8th, less than two weeks after moving to Prescott Valley, Arizona I received an email from Yavapai College with a letter attached from the Department of Veteran Affairs that stated “even though the institution [Yavapai College] may have accepted new students during the Spring 2015 to begin training in the Summer 2015, these students cannot be certified for VA education benefits until the school becomes compliant with 85/15 percent enrollment limitation.” The 85/15 rule was not used to determine VA education benefit eligibility in the past, and has affected my life in a negative way. To help you understand how, I have provided some background on the steps I have taken in my journey in order to purse the Aviation program at Yavapai College.

April 2014 is when I decided to leave active duty Air Force and join the Air Force Reserves. The only reason I left active duty was to pursue an education at Yavapai College in Aviation. I left active duty July 2014 and relocated to Luke AFB in Phoenix, Arizona where I started with my new reserve unit. I was sent to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri in November 2014 to complete training for my new position with the Air Force Reserves. Once my training was complete I reported back to my reserve unit at Luke AFB and moved to Prescott Valley, Arizona with my wife to begin the Aviation program at Yavapai College on May 11th, 2015.

This has been a long and arduous journey for me and my wife. We pushed through because we knew that there would be a light at the end of the tunnel. Or so we thought. Two weeks after arriving in Prescott Valley, Arizona I received the email from Yavapai College that took that light away. I have been working since April, 2014 to make this educational pursuit a reality. My wife left her career, her home and her family to support my educational aspirations. I left my career with the military, my home and my family to pursue my education. We have ran through our savings with only my reservist pay check coming in monthly, which only amounts to a little over $200. My wife is searching for jobs but as a recent college graduate with little experience, it has been hard on her. Leaving her career was not easy and she has to start completely over in a city that is not a mecca for jobs.

We were counting and relying on the benefits from the GI Bill to help support us financially while I complete this program. If I am not able to continue into the program we will have no additional income. We have spent just over $15,000 of our savings to make this move a reality. We are now in Prescott Valley, Arizona with no jobs, no careers, and no income. Our savings, what little is left, is not going to last us very long. Had this decision been made sooner I would not have left active duty Air Force and my wife would not have had to leave her career. But I did leave active duty, and my wife did leave her career. We came all this way to pursue my education only for it to be taken from me a month before the start of classes.

The reason it is being taken from me is because of the 85/15 rule. My educational benefits are now solely in the hands of civilians. I cannot pursue my education because fifteen percent of my classmates are not civilians. It is not right that veterans wanting to pursue this program have to hope and rely on citizens to pursue this program as well.

In the Air Force I worked in COMM NAV, or more specifically communications navigations avionics on the B-52’s. I have four years of experience working in and around aircraft. My goal is to continue doing so by becoming a helicopter pilot. Yet, if I cannot continue into the Aviation program at Yavapai College I will have to find another educational pursuit, another dream. I was promised certain benefits when I joined and when I signed for the GI Bill, but because of the VA, the very organization sworn to protect our nation’s veteran’s as stated in their own mission statement, “To fulfill President Lincoln's promise ‘To care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan’ by serving and honoring the men and women who are America’s Veterans,” my educational aspirations and my life will be demolished.

The sole reason we moved to Prescott Valley, Arizona was to pursue the Aviation program at Yavapai College in coordination with Guidance Aviation because I want a quality education. If I am not allowed to use my GI Bill to complete this program then I will have to move again. My wife and I will have to spend even more money in order to move to Phoenix, Arizona in the hopes that I can do a few months active work with my reserve unit in order to pay the bills. Two weeks ago we signed a lease that requires us to pay $2,000 in order to break it. If we have to move again we will have little to no savings left. Our entire financial stability depends on this program.

I urge you to reconsider the 85/15 ruling. The helicopter industry is booming, there is a surplus of jobs and not enough certified pilots. I have included a link to a recent news story from CNN at the end of this letter that supports what I have stated above. By allowing myself and other veterans the ability to use the GI Bill in this capacity is not only helping us become more productive citizens, but it is helping the helicopter industry as well. The reason why the majority of students in these programs are veterans is because we have worked around various aircraft while we served our country. We love what we do and we are good at it. I have given up everything to make this work and to pursue my education and career aspirations. Please help protect my rights and my educational benefits.

Very Respectfully,

SrA Christopher Shelby, USAF Reserves, former active duty service member

<<insert link to CNN story>>