

Congressional Testimony: Update of the Post 9/11 GI Bill - September 16, 2010

Sep 16, 2010

STATEMENT OF
JAMES D. WEAR, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
NATIONAL VETERANS SERVICE
VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WITH RESPECT TO
Update of the Post 9/11 GI Bill

WASHINGTON, D.C.

CHAIRWOMAN HERSETH SANDLIN, RANKING MEMBER BOOZMAN AND MEMBERS
OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

On behalf of the 2.1 million members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and our Auxiliaries,
we would like to thank the subcommittee for giving us the opportunity to testify today on
veterans' concerns regarding their education benefits and improvements to the Post 9/11 GI

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street Office 816.756.3390
Kansas City, MO 64111 Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E. Office 202.543.2239
Washington, D.C. 20002 Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

Bill.

The VFW is very proud to have worked with this subcommittee to pass the Post-9/11 GI Bill in July of 2008. A generation of veterans is now better equipped to seek higher education, with hundreds of thousands of veterans in schools across the nation directly benefiting from the dedication, work and leadership of this subcommittee and its staff.

VA's latest education workload report dated September 7, 2010, shows the number of non-Chapter 33 educations enrollments pending at 168,237. While VA recently reported that their automated data integration system had allowed them to process 130,000 Chapter 33 enrollments so far this year, we believe that they also need to focus on timely processing of non-Chapter 33 enrollments as well.

VA is to be commended for the timely processing of these claims and for having the "Spring 2010 GI Bill Benefit Processing" web site available to track their processing of education enrollments during the 2009-2010 academic year. However, there is no analogous "Fall 2010 GI Bill Benefit Processing" web site to track current education payment progress during the 2010-2011 academic year. VFW requests that VA have a web site to track the processing of both Chapter 33 and non-Chapter 33 education payments during the 2010-2011 academic year.

While VA's web site will help to track enrollments, there are additional improvements that can be made by reexamining the Post-9/11 GI Bill with an eye toward simplifying and strengthening the benefits it provides. We offer a number of suggestions to improve, simplify and strengthen the legislation with the goal of ensuring equitable benefits for equivalent service.

The VFW offers its strong support for H.R. 5933, the Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Improvements Act of 2010. We are enthusiastic about the direction this legislation takes the Post-9/11 GI Bill. The VFW believes a number of changes must be made to the Post-9/11 GI Bill to address the needs of today's service members, veterans and their families. Many of these changes are reflected in the bill.

Of the many positive changes in this legislation, the provisions that would allow Guard and Reserve members to count active-duty service under Title 32 orders toward Chapter 33 eligibility is perhaps the most important. This change will credit these men and women for their service securing our nation's borders and airports, cleaning up the Gulf, and for saving lives and property during and after natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina. We need to reward this continuous noble service with Post-9/11 GI Bill eligibility. Making sure the Reserve component receives equitable benefits for equivalent service is a top VFW priority.

Because of variations in state tuition and fees, this legislation would eliminate the state-based payment cap, in favor of the guarantee that Chapter 33 benefits will fully cover the

cost of public undergraduate or graduate programs across the United States. Further, it offers a dollar for dollar match up to \$20,000 per year at all approved non-public and foreign institutions of higher learning.

In the Post-9/11 GI Bill, half-time training was linked with less than half-time training. This legislation separates those definitions to clarify the difference between half-time training and less than half-time training. This change will make the rate of benefit payment easier for the veterans and the institutions of higher learning to understand as well for VA to administer.

This legislation seeks to provide a housing stipend for half-time students. VFW supports proportionate housing stipends. Current law does not pay a living allowance for half-time students, yet students enrolled with one credit more than half-time receive the full living stipend. The legislation proposes that if veterans enrolled in a program of education on a half-time basis the monthly housing stipend would be 50 percent of full-time basic housing stipend. This would make rates simpler to understand and greatly reduce the number of over charges to veterans. The VFW supports proportionate housing stipends for half-time students.

The VFW also supports providing housing stipends to veterans so that they can focus on their studies knowing their housing costs will be covered while pursuing a program of education at a foreign institution of higher learning.

One of the primary purposes of the GI Bill is to serve as a transition program. We encourage every veteran to attend classes in a traditional classroom setting among their civilian peers. We believe the GI Bill helps reintegrate veterans into civilian life by encouraging socialization in the classrooms and lecture halls of America. Nevertheless, the VFW supports providing housing stipends for distance learning so veterans can focus on their studies knowing not only are their housing costs provided for but their transportation costs are minimized. Also, offering one of the newest technological means of delivering learning to students helps educational institutions keep down tuition and fees.

There are many essential well paying jobs that require training not provided in colleges or universities. This legislation would expand the Post-9/11 GI Bill to include programs of education at institutions other than institutions of higher learning to include On-the-Job Training and Apprenticeships. The original GI Bill provided World War II veterans benefits for apprenticeships and vocational training. We believe the Post-9/11 GI Bill should also provide current veterans the same opportunity to seek careers in skilled trades. These programs represent the most effective direct employment programs available to our nation's newest veterans. The legislation would include certified Vocational Programs (non-degree granting institutions) and On-the-Job Training (OJT)/Apprenticeship programs to allow veterans the opportunity to learn a trade while receiving a living allowance, tuition and book stipend. Many veterans have technical skills and transferable credit acquired in the military.

that gives them a head start on earning a technical education. We should encourage veterans to invest in technical educations as these skill sets will help us to re-build our cities and restart our economy.

Each veteran should receive a living allowance based on BAH and the zip code of the OJT program. The annual \$1,000 book stipend would best be paid in \$500 intervals at the beginning of the training and then six months thereafter to aid the veteran in covering the cost of tools and program supplies.

We support educational assistance for flight training and programs of education taken by correspondence.

The VFW supports legislation which allows a lump sum for books, supplies, equipment and other educational costs for individuals on active duty pursuing a program of education.

This legislation would also establish a protocol allowing veterans to take multiple licensure and certification tests at no charge to their entitlement until the test costs exceed \$2,000.00. The VFW supports this.

This legislation ensures that supplemental education assistance under Subchapter III of Chapter 30, transfers into Chapter 33. The VFW supports the inclusion of these important incentives to assist the Department of Defense (DOD) in managing its military retention programs.

This legislation also adds to the Chapter 31 program an equitable housing stipend for veterans utilizing the Vocational Rehabilitation and Education programs. The VFW supports this.

These changes to the GI Bill are absolutely necessary to ensure that veterans have every opportunity to pursue and complete programs of learning that will not only help them make the transition from warrior to civilian, but will also provide them the tools to become and remain productive, taxpaying, members of society for a lifetime. By streamlining processes and opening new avenues to education and training, veterans will be better equipped to make their ambitions a reality.

Once again, thank you for including the voice of the VFW and its members; we look forward to continuing to work with you to improve the lives of America's veterans and their families.

Madam Chairwoman, this concludes my testimony. I will be pleased to respond to any questions you or the members of your subcommittee may have. Thank you.