

G.I. Bill Backgrounder

Many of our AFA members have contacted us with questions about the Post-9/11 GI Bill. While there are still many unanswered questions about how this legislation will apply in the many unique cases that are sure to come, we wanted to provide the information that is currently available.

First, the vast majority of the funds allocated for the new GI Bill will not be available until the 2009-2010 academic year. For the academic year about to begin, eligible recipients of the current GI Bill will receive a monthly benefit of \$1,321 per-month, an increase of \$220 per-month from the current amount.

Second, the new GI Bill is generous and broad in scope. Under this iteration of the program, there are no enrollment fees to pay – your eligibility is based solely on your length of service after September 10, 2001. Anyone on active-duty in the Armed Forces (including Guard and Reserve) for three years or more is entitled to the full benefit for themselves up to 15 years post-separation. At a minimum, anyone serving for three months after September 10, 2001 is eligible for 40% of the benefit. After that, eligibility is staggered based on the time you have served on active-duty status. For more specifics, you can check the link to a fact sheet produced by the VA at the bottom of this article. This new enhancement is a big step forward for the Reserve Component, who was previously required to remain in the Guard or Reserve to receive the money. To protect those injured in service to our country, anyone injured with at least 30 continuous days on active duty and discharged due to service-connected disability is eligible for 100% of the benefit.

Full eligibility benefits include four years of tuition at any of the Service member's home state public universities, plus a monthly stipend for housing and living expenses which averages about \$1100 nationwide. It also includes an annual expense of \$1,200 in tutoring services and \$1,000 more to cover books. Altogether, the benefit could exceed more than \$25,000 a year in the most expensive states. Veterans who have not yet used up their education benefits, or those who never signed up for the GI Bill when they were serving, can take advantage of the new rules.

Another key feature of the new GI Bill is the "Yellow Ribbon GI Education Enhancement" program. As was mentioned before, full eligibility includes four years at any public school in a given state. In other words, a service member can go to the most expensive state school in their home state with the VA paying full tuition and other costs as laid out previously. Under the "Yellow Ribbon" program, the VA will come to agreement with the private schools across our nation to split the costs of sending service personnel or their families, giving them an option to attend a private school if that is their wish. A major stipulation, and benefit to eligible recipients, is that a prerequisite to these agreements is that the school's share cannot be a loan; it must be a grant or scholarship. Once the

school has outlined the maximum contribution they are willing to offer each student, the VA would provide the rest, provided an agreement is reached. We hope that the VA will strike deals with private schools across the nation so that those who have performed all they have been tasked with will have the tools to pursue any academic dream they have for themselves or their families.

With the Post-9/11 GI Bill, transferability of the GI Bill benefit to a spouse or dependants is now a reality. Under the new GI Bill, troops who served at least 10 years on active duty will be able to transfer their benefit to a spouse or dependent child. Spouses can receive the money even sooner if their service member has been in the Armed Forces at least six years and agrees to another four-year contract. Families now have discretion in choosing how to divide the benefit, as long as they do not exceed 36 months of college classes. For example, a retired Airman can use two years of benefits to pay for a two-year degree program, and then transfer the last two years to a spouse or child, provided they meet the length of service requirements.

When thinking about this new transferability, keep in mind that this is seen as more of a retention tool, rather than an immediate benefit for personnel and family. Unfortunately, this ability to transfer benefits only applies to the Post 9/11 GI Bill program, and not the previous renditions of the GI Bill.

There are other limitations to the benefit. For those veterans who have already used all of their GI Bill benefits, the changes do not offer any new money. Many of the most vocal supporters of the bill, older veterans who were not provided a GI Bill benefit adequate to cover the costs of a four-year college education, acknowledge the changes will help the next generation of young service members more than themselves.

Further, if troops or veterans attend state schools that are less expensive, they will not get to pocket the difference – the benefit only covers what veterans are actually charged by their respective schools. If they decide to go to private schools not in the Yellow Ribbon program or out-of-state colleges, they will have to cover the difference between their higher tuition bills and the state-assigned reimbursement figure. Additionally, the Post-9/11 GI Bill will not cover some types of non-academic expenses related to on the job training, apprenticeships, flight training, and more.

There are still many unknowns about the new benefit. The Senate is already working on technical amendments to clarify some administrative errors in the recently-passed legislation. Also, the VA is working to come to grips with this massive and complex new program and will need to promulgate rules on a host of applicability issues. As they do, we will be watching with the interests of our membership as the top priority.

For more information, visit the VA's website for the new GI Bill at www.gibill.va.gov, and pay particular attention to a helpful brochure they have put together, which you can find at http://www.gibill.va.gov/S22/Post_911_Factsheet.pdf.