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Post 9/11 GI Bill offers servicemembers unprecedented education benefits

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HEIDELBERG, Germany -- Soon pursuing their education goals will be easier for many U.S. Army Europe Soldiers, thanks to the new Post-9/11 GI Bill that applies to schooling on or after Aug. 1. The Bill provides the most comprehensive educational benefits to servicemembers since the original GI Bill was signed into law in 1944.

Eligible servicemembers may receive full tuition and fees, a new monthly housing stipend and an annual stipend of up to \$1,000 for books and supplies for up to 36 months of education benefits, generally payable for 15 years following release from active duty.

To qualify for benefits individuals must receive an honorable discharge; must have at least 90 days of aggregate service on or after Sept. 11, 2001, or have been discharged with a service-connected disability after 30 days, according to information on the Department of Veterans Affairs Web site. Reservists and National Guard members who have been activated for more than 90 days since 9/11 will have access to the same GI Bill benefits.



SPC IDA TATE

Pfc. Charlysa Mclean, a supply specialist with Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 7th Theater Tactical Signal Brigade, participates in a University of Maryland business administration class at Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan June 16. Under the new Post-9/11 GI Bill, Soldier-students will soon have access to a greatly expanded array of education options.

What makes the Post-9/11 GI Bill different from the other GI Bill programs is that tuition and fees are paid directly to the school. The maximum rates the Post-9/11 GI Bill can pay by law are based on the highest public in-state undergraduate tuition fees, and rates vary from state to state. A complete breakdown is listed on the VA Web site.

But attending higher-cost private colleges or universities is not out of the question with the Bill's "Yellow Ribbon Program" designed to further help GI Bill participants meet all tuition costs. Colleges and universities in the program have agreed to waive or offset up to 50 percent of those higher tuition costs, and VA will match this additional funding for eligible students. VA officials say more than 1,000 schools had signed on to the program as of mid-July.

Yet another way the new Bill helps offset the financial burden of pursuing an education is by paying eligible full-time students a monthly housing allowance, which is currently based on the Basic Allowance for Housing for a Soldier in pay grade E-5 with dependents at the location of the school.

"It has been a long time since we've had an education initiative that includes tuition fees [and a] housing allowance [and] takes care of all of the requirements required to go to school," Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric K. Shinseki said. This will enable veterans to focus on their studies, he added, without the distractions of figuring out how to pay for them.

No doubt the most heralded and unprecedented feature of the new GI Bill is participants' ability to transfer unused educational benefits to their spouses or children. DoD announced the policy earlier this year and established criteria for eligibility and transfer of benefits June 23. As long as they qualify for and meet specific service requirements, any enlisted or commissioned member of the armed forces serving on active duty or in the Selected Reserve on or after Aug. 1 will be eligible to transfer their benefits, according to officials.

Most servicemembers who have at least six years of military service as of Aug. 1 and agree to serve an additional four years qualify for the transferability option. According to information on the Defense Department Web site, DoD has proposed measures to cover several categories of servicemembers whose circumstances don't fit neatly into this formula.

"I have not seen this much excitement before about education benefits programs. There are so many good aspects to this Bill that truly appears to have addressed the issues facing servicemembers seeking to fulfill their education goals," said John W. Bush, director of education for the Army Installation Management Command-Europe. "The transferability of benefits in itself is a fantastic feature for the Soldiers."

The transferability provision -- which Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates pushed after first hearing the idea from a military spouse group at Fort Hood, Texas -- is something long wished for within the military community. "That issue has been raised at just about

every Army Family Action Plan conference over the years,” said Ruth Foster, an IMCOM-E education services specialist. “While supporting both recruiting and retention efforts, by giving Soldiers the option to transfer their education benefits, it is truly an example of how the Army is living up to its claim of taking care of the Soldiers and their families.”

The full plan is detailed on the VA Web site, but some highlights of the transferability benefit include allowing eligible servicemembers to register the names of any immediate family member with whom they would like to share their benefits and designating how many months of benefits each person named can receive.

Under the provisions of the policy, the servicemember’s 36 months of benefits -- the equivalent of four nine-month academic years -- can be transferred to a spouse, one or more children, or any combination of family members enrolled in the Defense Eligibility Enrollment Reporting System.

VA officials say flexibility is also crucial to the transferability benefit, as the policy gives servicemembers the option to use some benefits themselves and transfer what they haven’t used to one or more family members. Even after benefits are transferred they remain the “property” of the servicemember who earned them, who can revoke them or redesignate who receives them at any time.

“I am extremely excited about the transferability benefit,” said Master Sgt. Karen Hicks, staff assistant at the NATO Theater Engagement Cell here. “Parents save for a number of years for their children’s’ education. You worry if you will be able to afford it. Now, with this transferability benefit, essentially my daughter will get close to a full ride at college. It’s a huge relief for a parent.”

Participation in the Post-9/11 GI Bill and the transferability option are expected to be enormous. A secure Web site (see address below) has been established to allow eligible servicemembers to register their family members for benefits.

While the Bill will be a boon for many, the VA is also cautioning servicemembers to research all the education options available to them, to ensure they choose a plan that’s right for them. The VA Web site offers comparison charts, scenarios, and other information to aid in decision-making.

“The important thing to remember is that this is one of several programs we administer, all of which have different eligibility criteria,” said Keith Wilson, the VA’s director of education, in a department press release. “The program that is best for the individual veteran is not always going to be the Post-9/11 GI Bill.”

In a "DoDLive" bloggers roundtable July 16, Wilson encouraged servicemembers interested in using Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits this fall to contact the VA soon to determine their eligibility. “We wanted people to come in as quickly as possible, because the sooner we can get that eligibility determination out of the way, the better place we are [in] to

process the enrollment [certifications] when the schools start to come in with that information.”

Processing times to verify eligibility can take from a few weeks up to a few months, Wilson said. However, colleges and universities have been ready to receive the enrollment applications for some time and the VA already is processing fall enrollment forms, he noted.

For detailed information on the program, visit www.gibill.va.gov, www.veteransbenefitsgibill.com (which includes links to Facebook and YouTube channels), or www.defenselink.mil/home/features/2009/0409_gibill.

Eligible servicemembers can register their family members for benefits at <https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/TEB>.



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