

Revised GI Bill effective in 2009

But some tuition relief for veterans will be immediate

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WASHINGTON — Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans seeking to use the new GI Bill for school right away may be disappointed to learn that the significantly expanded benefits will not be available for another year.

But the new GI Bill, signed into law this week, offers some immediate tuition relief for veterans while the government sorts out how to administer the most comprehensive changes to veterans education benefits since the original 1944 GI Bill.

The new GI Bill, similar to the World War II program, offers free tuition and fees at public colleges and universities along with a housing allowance and up to \$1,000 a year for books and supplies. It more than doubles the education benefit for some veterans based on where they live and go to school. The law also allows career service personnel to transfer the benefit to a spouse or dependent children.

U.S. Rep. Neil Abercrombie, D-Hawai'i, said he co-sponsored the legislation "to put our money where our mouth is.

"It restores the promise of a full, four-year college education for veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan," said Abercrombie, a senior member of the House Armed Services Committee.

"This is a dramatically new benefit," said Eric Hilleman, deputy director of national legislative service for Veterans of Foreign Wars.

U.S. Sen. Daniel K. Akaka, D-Hawai'i, chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, said he pushed to include a delay in implementing the new benefits to give the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Defense Department time for an orderly transition.

"With this time, we can all work together to address issues before they become problems," said Akaka, who co-sponsored the Senate bill.

Keith M. Wilson, education service director for the VA, said the agency would use the time to write the regulations, train staff and build the new computer software needed to administer the law.

"Don't go applying for benefits under this program right now because we're not authorized to pay benefits under it right now."

But if veterans can't wait a year and go to school under the current GI Bill, they will see their monthly checks increase by 20 percent under the new GI Bill, signed into law Monday by President Bush.

That means veterans attending school after Aug. 1 will receive \$1,321 a month, up from \$1,101 previously.

Here's a look at the GI Bill's new education benefits.

Q: Who is eligible for the new program?

A: All troops, including those in the National Guard and reserve, who have served on active duty for more than 90 days since Sept. 11, 2001.

Veterans may also receive full benefits if they served at least 30 continuous days on active duty after 9/11 and were discharged because of a disability caused by their service.

Q: How many months of education benefits are provided?

A: The maximum benefit is 36 months of tuition and fees, enough for four academic years of school. But the percentage each veteran receives is linked to the amount of active-duty service.

Those who served three years active duty, or were discharged because of a disability after 30 days, may receive the full 36 months of benefits.

The minimum amount of active duty is 90 days for which veterans receive 40 percent of the full benefit.

Q. How much assistance is provided?

A: Veterans attending school more than half time would receive up to 100 percent of the tuition and fees charged by their state's most expensive public university.

The benefit also can be used to help pay tuition and fees at more expensive private schools. If the private school helped the veteran with difference in tuition cost, the VA could match the amount dollar for dollar.

One big plus for veterans is that the VA pays the tuition and fees directly to the school, said Boulay, who is using the GI Bill to work on a doctoral degree in sociology and education.

The law also provides a housing allowance based on the amount the Defense Department pays for a sergeant with a family living off base. Wilson said the amount varies among 300 zones across the country but currently averages about \$1,250 a month and will be paid to students attending school more than half time in a classroom setting.

A separate stipend of up to \$1,000 a year is also provided for books and supplies, he said.

Q. How long is a veteran eligible for the benefit?

A: Veterans who qualify for the new GI Bill have up to 15 years from end of their last period of active duty to use the benefit.

Q. What about the \$1,200 recruits are now required to pay to qualify for the current GI Bill's education program when they leave the service?

A: New military personnel are not required to pay anything to be eligible.

Q. What kind of training does the new GI Bill cover?

A: It will cover education for associate, bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees as well as vocational and technical training and overseas study, according to the VA. But the programs have to be offered by institutions of higher education and approved by the VA.

Veterans also may be able to take other types of training such as on-the-job, apprenticeship, correspondence courses, flight school and preparatory courses with the new education benefit.