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Post-9/11 GI Bill payments delayed for student veterans, emergency checks discontinued

► Heather Bashaw | Staff Writer



**A**s many as 14,000 students did not receive the living stipends they expected from the Post-9/11 GI Bill at the beginning of November. Many student veterans have been forced to drop out of school for failing to pay tuition fees on time, the inability to purchase textbooks causing them to fall behind in classes, or needing to find full-time work to pay living expenses while waiting for Post-9/11 GI Bill payments to arrive.

"My tuition assistance has never been on time. But it would normally come by the end of September or early October, so that is what I was expecting for the new Post-9/11 GI Bill," Missouri Army National Guard veteran Eden Stone said. "I ended up having to get student loans and two part-time jobs."

Stone is a public relations graduate from the University of Central Missouri. She served in the National Guard from May 2003 to May 2009 and was deployed

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– Eden Stone, National Guard Veteran and University of Central Missouri Graduate

in Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2005 to 2007.

The Veterans Affairs office began distributing \$3,000 emergency checks to sustain student veterans until the applications could be processed, but as of October 29, no more emergency payments were granted. The 57 regional VA offices gave the emergency checks to more than 50,000 students who were not paid their GI Bill living stipends by October 1. The money will be deducted from future GI Bill payments, which raises some concerns about students who received more money in the form of emergency funds than they would otherwise have received.

Stone did not seek one of the \$3,000 emergency checks for veterans.

“The closest office was in St. Louis, and I figured it would only be a few more weeks until I received money,” Stone said. “Little did I know that I would be waiting until months after my college graduation.”

VA employees are working overtime to process the 285,000 applications received for the GI Bill. Of those, 225,000 were certified, and the student veterans received their certificates of eligibility. However, only a small percentage of the actual payments has been distributed.

Applications for the new GI Bill currently take about one month to process. The Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) organization is pressuring the VA to speed up the process and encouraging career colleges and universities to defer tuition and fees for veterans awaiting Post-9/11 GI Bill payments. Many colleges have been forced to put special systems in place to help veteran students stay enrolled.

The IAVA recommends that, in order to speed up the process, veterans should thoroughly fill out the required VA form 22-1190, bring a copy of their VA certificate of eligibility to their school certifying official, coordinate with the certifying official to ensure paperwork gets submitted correctly and promptly, fill out the FAFSA as a backup

source of additional financial aid and report any schools that fail to defer payments to the IAVA.

By next year, the Veterans Affairs office hopes to have a more streamlined, or even automated, system to process applications faster.

“They should be focusing on their studies, not worrying about financial difficulties,” said VA Secretary Eric Shinseki.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill is said to be the most generous since the World War II GI Bill. Benefits of the new bill include up to 100 percent tuition and fee coverage, a monthly living or housing stipend, up to \$1,000 per year for books and other school supplies, a one-time relocation allowance, and the option to transfer benefits to family members. Some veterans may also be eligible for a one-time reimbursement of up to \$2,000 for a licensing or certification exam or work-study programs and \$100 monthly for tutorial assistance.

Eligibility for the Post-9/11 GI Bill is determined based on the veteran’s length of service since September 11. The bill provides housing and book stipends for veterans who have served at least three years of active duty, and veterans who have served at least 90 days but less than three years receive partial benefits depending on their length of service. GI benefits are available for 15 years following the veteran’s last discharge.

“The good news is that kids are taking advantage of it,” Shinseki told the Associated Press. “They’re lining up to go to school.”

The Post-9/11 GI Bill was signed into law in July of 2008 and went into effect on August 1 of this year. The bill is expected to cost \$62 billion over a 10-year period. ■



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