

## **GI Bill Housing Stipend : 50% Reduction for Online Students Unless Congress Acts**

Air Force veteran Ally Schroeder has had nearly everything in her education and career path planned out for the last three years, so it's stressful not to know whether she'll have enough money for housing in January. "My whole college schedule has been set since I was a junior, so I really don't have a lot of options for my last semester next year," said Schroeder, a 27-year-old clinical nutrition services senior at the University of Nevada Las Vegas. "And those classes are only being offered remotely [because of the coronavirus pandemic], which means I may not have the in-person classes I need to qualify for the full housing benefit I rely on."

Air Force veteran Ally Schroeder and her husband Schroeder is one of hundreds of thousands of student veterans who could see their GI Bill benefits cut by hundreds of dollars a month if lawmakers don't act within the next few weeks. In her work with the college campus's vet center, she has heard concerns from dozens of fellow students like her who worry the issue won't get the attention it needs from Congress before it's too late. "It's disheartening to have to explain to these folks why they might not get their housing stipends next year," she said. "Next semester is coming up quickly. And I can't tell them what will happen because I don't know."

At issue is how post-9/11 GI Bill benefits are paid out to students who attend college classes remotely, rather than in-person. Students using the benefit receive money for tuition plus a monthly housing stipend. Individuals enrolled in traditional in-person classes receive the full financial benefit, while students in online-only classes get half of that housing stipend. But when the coronavirus pandemic shuttered college campuses across America in spring 2020, it forced Congress to walk back those rules, giving the VA Secretary broad authority to continue paying out the expected housing stipends for students suddenly forced into online classes.

Those authorities expire on 21 December 2021. Many campuses, like UNLV, are still operating with limited in-person options, meaning veterans attending classes there will qualify only for half the housing stipend rate. For Schroeder, that means about \$800 less a month, a significant hit to her family finances. At other schools — particularly ones in high-cost cities on the East and West Coast — the difference could be \$2,000 a month or more. "This is causing a lot of stress for students we're talking to," said John Kamin, legislative associate for The American Legion. "We're already at the panic level. School schedules are set for next semester and many students are looking at drastic decisions about whether they can continue if the money isn't there."

Veterans Affairs officials for months have lobbied lawmakers to extend the pandemic authorities to ensure students' lives aren't disrupted. On 18 November 2021, VA Secretary Denis McDonough told reporters he has been in regular contact with Capitol Hill about addressing the issue as soon as possible. "I am worried about it," he said. "We're constantly looking at our programming, making sure that we're doing everything available to us. But some of these emergency provisions are statutorily based, so we need Congress to act."

Lawmakers have promised for months they are tracking the issue, but left town for Thanksgiving break on 19 November 2021 without finalizing an extension. In October, Rep. David Trone, (D-MD) introduced legislation to fix the issue, pushing those pandemic authorizations back until

summer 2022. On 18 November, Sens. Catherine Cortez Masto (D-NV) and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Jon Tester (D-MT) offered companion legislation in their chamber in the hopes of moving on the issue quickly when lawmakers return from break. "Our veterans have devoted their lives in service to our country, and providing them with the housing resources they need to complete their education is vital to facilitating their transition from active duty service back to the workforce," Cortez Masto said in a statement. "[This legislation] will ensure our veterans don't have to worry about funding for housing when deciding on their academic future."

But several barriers remain. The House bill has been held up in part by technicalities surrounding the costs of the measure. Even though the housing stipends would have been fully paid if not for the pandemic, under the law "extra" \$200 million in benefits to be given to students must be offset with other funding cuts or revenue sources. House Veterans' Affairs Committee ranking member Mike Bost (R-IL) has introduced separate legislation with a potential solution for that pay-for, but it has not yet advanced in the chamber. On the other side of Capitol Hill, when the Senate returns to town, lawmakers there will face a long list of must-pass measures beyond the GI Bill issue, including the annual defense authorization act, a federal budget extension and an increase in the federal debt ceiling.

Only two weeks of legislative work remain on the congressional 2021 calendar, although that schedule is likely to be extended given the workload. Meanwhile, students like Schroeder are forced to watch and wait from their homes-turned-classrooms. She and her husband have enough savings to cover their mortgage payments if her housing stipends are cut in half. But Schroeder said it won't be easy to focus on her final semester of classes starting in January if those financial pressures are on her mind. "It's all out of our hands right now," she said. "This is money that we planned around, and now we don't know if we'll have it. It just kind of feels like veterans are being put on the back burner right now."