

## Veterans Benefits and Transition Act

The Veterans Benefits and Transition Act passed by Congress on 20 December 2018 has been signed by the president. It protects student veterans from future hassles with educational institutions over non-payment of GI Bill benefits. Last fall, major technology failures at the Department of Veterans Affairs led to delayed and inaccurate payments for thousands of Post-9/11 GI Bill users, as the agency failed to implement a provision of the Forever GI Bill law that changed the way housing stipends are calculated. In some cases, students grappling with late rent or mortgage bills as a result of the delays faced another challenge: Their schools charged late fees for tuition bills that VA didn't pay on time, blocked access to campus facilities or did not allow them to register for the next semester of classes until their balance was covered. Ashlynn Haycock, deputy director of policy and legislation for the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, said members of her organization were even advised by schools to take out loans to cover tuition costs—even though the payments were late through no fault of their own. If schools don't agree to the new rules, they won't be allowed to keep enrolling students using the Post-9/11 GI Bill. **Additional benefits to veterans covered under the bill include:**

- **Spouse voting.** Military spouses can now elect to use the same residence as their active-duty spouse for state and local voting purposes, regardless of when or where they got married and whether they are currently living in that state because of military orders. Under previous law, a spouse had to meet the residency requirements of a state on his or her own merit for the purposes of voting.
- **VA Payment documentation.** VA is required to provide veterans with electronic proof that they will be receiving housing payments from the VA. Students can then show these to landlords. Students who live in high-cost areas, especially, can have trouble finding housing without a job to put on their application, according to a House Veterans Affairs Committee staffer familiar with the legislation. The documentation from VA would provide information for landlords, such as how much and how long a veteran will be receiving benefits that help them pay for housing.
- **Spouse lease termination.** The new law allows the spouse of a service member who dies on active duty to terminate a residential lease for up to one year after the death without being penalized. This expands on the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act, which allows service members to break lease if they deploy or PCS.
- **Transition help.** For troops transitioning out of the military, the VA will now post a list of programs and organizations that can help. The law requires the VA to contract with a non-federal entity to identify these programs, which will include smaller, more community-based organizations, according to the committee aide.
- **Homeless Vet Job Program Access.** The law requires better access to jobs programs for homeless veterans. This provision of the Veterans Benefits and Transition Act is “an absolute game changer” for homeless veterans, said Kathryn Monet, CEO of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, which has been advocating for a law like this for five years. Previously, veterans had to be either on the streets or in a shelter to qualify for employment assistance under the federal Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program. But now, veterans have 60 days after moving into housing to apply for these services. The provision applies to veterans participating in the Department of Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing program and a similar initiative for Native American veterans, as well as the

Supportive Services for Veteran Families program. It also applies to veterans who are transitioning after being incarcerated and other recently homeless veterans, according to a summary of the legislation released by Congress. “It’s basically the difference between housed and going back to homelessness for some of these veterans,” Monet said, adding later, “We know from our work how important this bill is to fix systemic problems that create unnecessary barriers to housing stability for veterans.”

- **Reservists’ employment benefits.** Certain members of the National Guard and reserves called to active duty will have more time to use benefits under the VA’s Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program, or Voc Rehab. The program provides job counseling and other services for veterans with a VA disability rating of 20 percent or higher. Veterans that qualify must use the program within 12 years of separating from the military. The clock gets paused for Guardsmen and reservists called to active duty. So, if they get activated for a year, they will get another year to complete Vocational Rehab. Before the new law, this did not apply to members serving under particular orders relating to national emergencies and combatant commands. As a result, such service members would lose time to use the benefit as they continued to serve. Now, the clock gets paused for them the same way as it does for their fellow Guardsman and reservists. Daniel Elkins, legislative director at the Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States, said the new law will help many of the organization’s constituents. Vocational Rehab benefits are “hugely important” for those who are service disabled, and this “is an extremely beneficial expansion to those benefits and long overdue,” he said.

- **Enhanced burial rights.** The new law allows spouses and children of active-duty service members to be buried in veteran cemeteries through Sept. 30, 2024, even if they pass away before the service member — something that was previously allowed but only with the VA’s approval. “We did expedite that,” said Patricia Lynch Watts, director of legislative and regulatory service for the National Cemetery Administration. “We tried not to make that too burdensome on the family, but there is certain information that we had to ask for, and it had to go through the process of being approved here by the secretary or the undersecretary, which could delay plans for burial by the family.” The law also provides headstones and markers for burials in tribal cemeteries that receive grants from the VA. Watts said this corrects a previous oversight, which granted these for state veteran cemeteries but not those on tribal lands. There are currently 11 tribal veteran cemeteries across the country and another two under construction, according to information provided by the VA.