

August 2009 Department News Bulletin

VA CLAIMS PROCESSING Update 01:

Pittsburgh's congressional delegation is asking an outside agency to investigate how the Department of Veterans Affairs' regional office handles their veterans' benefits claims. In a letter to the Governmental Accountability Office, three congressmen and two senators say an investigation by the VA's Office of Inspector General was "incomplete at best." The inspector general report confirmed allegations that employees deliberately delayed processing some claims in order to obtain \$300 performance bonuses, but it didn't substantiate an allegation that the employees were following orders from their managers when they held up the claims. Rep. Tim Murphy (R-Upper St. Clair) said the Pittsburgh regional office is the fifth-worst of the 56 regional offices in the Veterans Benefits Administration. More than 27% of the 4,850 claims pending at the office are at least six months old. Given the office's poor performance, the news that some of the delays were deliberate has outraged the congressional delegation, he said. They want the GAO to tell them how to improve the office "so that this situation can't and won't happen again," he said. Rep. Jason Altmire (D-McCandless) said Congress has tried unsuccessfully several times to eliminate a national backlog in veterans' benefit claims. Hearing that some of the backlog in the Pittsburgh office has been deliberate just adds to lawmakers' frustration, he said. "It is simply unacceptable that veterans who put their lives on the line to protect their country are being forced to wait for months to receive the benefits they have earned," Altmire said. Rep. Mike Doyle (D-Swissvale) and Senators Bob Casey (D-Scranton) and Arlen Specter, (D-Philadelphia) also signed onto the investigation request.

[Source: TRIBUNE-REVIEW Brian Bowling article 5 Jun 09 ++]

GI Bill Update 53:

Many questions about the Post-9/11 GI Bill were answered in late June when decisions were made on two of the plan's most important features: transfer of benefits to family members and Yellow Ribbon agreements (see below) that raise the value of the benefit, particularly to attend private colleges. Here's a summary of how these features will operate, according to DOD and VA policymakers:

1. Transferability

To be eligible to transfer benefits to a spouse or child, service members must be on active duty or in the Selected Reserve on or after Aug. 1, 2009 - the date the new GI Bill takes effect. Service members also must have at least six years in service (10 years to transfer benefits to children) and must commit to serve four more years from the date that a transfer of benefits is approved. (See below for exceptions to the four-year rule).

Service members will execute transfers through a secure "Transferability of Educational Benefits" Web site, <https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/TEB/>. They can log in using a Common Access Card, a DOD

Self-Service User ID, or a PIN for accessing online military pay accounts administered by the Defense Financing and Accounting Service.

The electronic application will request information from a service member to confirm Post-9/11 GI Bill eligibility and verify dependency status of family members to receive transferred benefits. Family members must be enrolled in the Defense Eligibility Enrollment Reporting System (DEERS). Applicants also will need to designate the number of months of benefit to be transferred and their allocation to family members, if more than one person is to receive educational assistance.

Completed applications will be reviewed by a service member's branch of service. Once they are approved, new service obligation dates will be set.

The effective date of transfer will be no earlier than Aug. 1, 2009, regardless of application date. Data from approved applications will be transmitted each evening to the VA. Family members then will apply through a VA Web site, www.gibill.va.gov, for certificates of eligibility to use the transferred education benefits. Spouses and children will be able to use the new GI Bill like any eligible veteran would.

Service members who have no family members planning to attend college this fall are being asked to delay visiting the transfer Web site until at least July 15 so that applications for fall students can be processed more rapidly.

Service members can change transfer choices at any time, whether reallocating benefits among eligible family members or revoking transfers to use benefits themselves. Unused GI Bill benefits always will remain the property of the servicemember who earned them.

Congress designed the transfer feature with some incongruities. For example, any family member not approved for transfer before a service member retires or separates from service will be denied the opportunity, unless the service member later reenters service. Veterans who remarry or have more children after leaving service will be unable to transfer GI Bill benefits to these new family members. With this limitation in mind, officials are urging service members to transfer at least one month of the GI Bill benefit to each family member before leaving service, to lock in the option to transfer benefits at some later date.

Another transferability quirk affects spouses of service members on active duty. Those given transferred benefits to attend college, including the most expensive private schools, will have tuition and fees fully covered. But benefits for veterans themselves, or benefits transferred to college-bound children, will be capped so as not to exceed tuition and fees charged by the most expensive public college or university in a state.

Spouses of active duty service members who use transferred benefits to attend public universities will have a more modest education package than other users of the new GI Bill including, again, children of active duty service members and veterans who earned this education benefit. This is because active duty spouses will not be paid the plan's monthly living allowance, equal to the local Basic Allowance for Housing for a married E-5, nor will they get the new GI Bill's \$1,000-a-year stipend for books or supplies.

Spouses of drilling reservists will qualify for both the living allowance and book stipend because reservists, unlike their active duty counterparts, are not paid a monthly housing allowance.

2. Exceptions to the Four-Year Rule

There is a permanent exception to the additional service requirement for transfer of GI Bill benefits. It applies to service members who have served at least 10 years and are barred by service policy or statute from completing a full four more years.

Service members facing high-year tenure or mandatory retirement rules still will be able to transfer benefits if they serve the maximum time allowed under law or policy.

To preserve proper force structure and promotion opportunities, several temporary exceptions to the four - year rule also will apply to service members eligible to retire from Aug. 1, 2009, to Aug. 1, 2012. A service member is considered retirement - eligible after completing 20 years of active duty service or 20 qualifying years of reserve service. Based on retirement eligibility dates, these service members will only have to serve one to three additional years from the date benefits are approved for transfer.

3. Yellow Ribbon Agreements.

More on Yellow Ribbon colleges and their agreements can be found online at www.gibill.va.gov/GI_Bill_Info/CH33/Yellow_ribbon.htm.

A total of 1165 colleges and universities have signed Yellow Ribbon agreements with the VA for the 2009 - 10 academic year, making their undergraduate or graduate degree programs more affordable to at least some new GI Bill beneficiaries. That total includes roughly 750 private nonprofit schools, 250 private for-profit schools, and 165 public universities.

For most users, the new GI Bill covers only tuition and fees up to amounts set for the most expensive public university in their state of residence. Students enrolled in private colleges or attending out-of-state public schools still might face huge out-of-pocket costs. The amounts not covered will vary greatly, too. Texas students, for example, will receive up to \$1,333 a credit hour plus \$12,130 a year to cover school fees. California students, by contrast, will be reimbursed up to \$6,587 in yearly fees but receive no tuition coverage because tuition is free to in-state students at public colleges.

Under the Yellow Ribbon program, schools are encouraged to waive up to 50 percent of the difference between their tuition and fees and those covered by the new GI Bill. The VA, in turn, will match in higher benefits what the college waived, adding value to the GI Bill for students attending private schools, out-of-state public universities, or state school graduate degree programs.

The deadline to pen Yellow Ribbon deals for the 2009 - 10 academic year was June 15. Many schools, with endowments battered by investment losses the past year, decided they couldn't afford to waive costs too deeply for GI Bill users. Others elected to waive thousands of dollars in costs but only for small numbers of GI Bill students.

The VA mandates that waivers be offered on a first-come, first-served basis. They cannot be offered, for example, only to students in select fields of study or only to students with the highest grades or test scores.

[Source: MOAA News Exchange Tom Philpott article 15 Jul 09 ++]

MILITARY HISTORY ANNIVERSARIES:

Jul 16 1779 - Revolutionary War: American troops capture Stony Point, N.Y.

Jul 16 1945 - WWII: The United States detonates the first atomic bomb in a test at Alamogordo, N. M.

Jul 17 1898 - Spanish-American War: U.S. troops take Santiago de Cuba.

Jul 17 1966 - Vietnam: Ho Chi Minh orders a partial mobilization of to defend against American airstrikes.

Jul 18 1915 - WWI: 2nd Battle of Isonzo begins & ends with loss of 280,000 men

Jul 18 1942 - WWII: German Me-262, the first jet-propelled aircraft to fly in combat, makes its first flight.

Jul 18 1971 - Vietnam: New Zealand and Australia announce they will pull their troops out of Vietnam.

Jul 19 1942 - WWII: German U-boats are withdrawn from positions off the U.S. Atlantic coast due to American anti-submarine countermeasures.

Jul 20 1917 - WWI: Draft lottery held; #258 is 1st drawn

Jul 20 1944 - WWII: Adolf Hitler is wounded in an assassination attempt by German Army officers.

Jul 20 1950 - Korean War: The U.S. Army's Task Force Smith is pushed back by superior forces.

Jul 21 1861 - Civil War: In the first major battle of the War, Confederate forces defeat the Union Army along Bull Run near Manassas Junction, Virginia. The battle becomes known as Manassas by the Confederates, while the Union calls it Bull Run

Jul 21 1944 - WWII: U.S. Army and Marine forces land on Guam in the Marianas.

Jul 21 1954 - Vietnam: The French sign an armistice with the Viet Minh that ends the war but divides Vietnam into two countries.

Jul 22 1775 - Revolutionary War: George Washington took command of the Continental Army.

Jul 22 1814 - Five Indian tribes in Ohio make peace with the United States and declare war on Britain.

Jul 22 1966 - Vietnam: B-52 bombers hit the DMZ between North and South Vietnam for the first time.

Jul 22 1987 - Gulf War: US began escorting re-flagged Kuwaiti tankers in Persian Gulf

Jul 23 1944 - WWII: US forces invade Japanese-held Tinian.

Jul 23 1962 - The Geneva Conference on Laos forbids the United States to invade eastern Laos.

Jul 24 1990 - Gulf War: U.S. warships in Persian Gulf placed on alert after Iraq masses nearly 30,000 troops near its border with Kuwait

Jul 25 1944 - WWII: Allied forces begin the breakthrough of German lines in Normandy.

Jul 25 1990 - Gulf War: U.S. Ambassador tells Iraq, US won't take sides in Iraq-Kuwait dispute.

Jul 27 1861 - Civil War: Confederate troops occupy Fort Fillmore, New Mexico

Jul 27 1944 - WWII: U.S. troops complete the liberation of Guam.

Jul 27 1953 - Korea: Representatives of the United Nations, Korea and China sign an armistice at Panmunjon ending the war.

Jul 27 1964 - Vietnam: President Lyndon Johnson sends an additional 5,000 advisers to South Vietnam.

Jul 28 1914 - WWI: War begins when Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia followed by Germany declaring war on France (3 AUG). On 4 AUG Germany invaded Belgium, Britain declared war on Germany, and President Woodrow Wilson declared policy of U.S. neutrality.

Jul 28 1945 - A B-25 bomber crashes into the Empire State Building in New York City, killing 13 people.

Jul 28 1965 - Vietnam: LBJ sends 50,000 more soldiers to Vietnam (total of 125,000)

Jul 29 1915 - U.S. Marines land at Port-au-Prince to protect American interests in Haiti.

Jul 29 1967 - Fire aboard carrier USS Forrestal in Gulf of Tonkin kills 134, \$100 million damage.

Jul 30 1942 - FDR signs bill creating women's Navy auxiliary agency (WAVES)

Jul 30 1944 - US 30th division reaches suburbs of St-Lo Normandy

Jul 30 1945 - WWII: After delivering parts of the first atomic bomb the U.S. cruiser Indianapolis is torpedoed/sinks, 880 die.

Jul 31 1813 - Revolutionary War: British invade Plattsburgh NY

Jul 31 1991 - Senate votes to allow women to fly combat aircraft

[Source: Various Jun 09 ++]