This morning’s American Legion news clips contained an AP story headlined, “AP: New GI benefits vary widely by state.” The story failed to address important aspects of the benefits such as the “Yellow Ribbon” program.

National Commander Rehbein today sent a letter to AP Education Reporter Justin Pope that clarifies the incorrect and unfair characterization of the federal government’s role in their awards. The article follows his letter:

Mr. Justin Pope
The Associated Press
4800 Six Forks Rd, Suite 210,
Raleigh NC 27609-5245

Dear Mr. Pope,

With regard to your recent AP Impact article entitled “New GI benefits vary widely by state,” we commend you for your effort to identify disparities within the Department of Veterans Affairs’ (VA’s) new system of monetary compensation for educational expenses, but must take issue with an incorrect and unfair characterization of the federal government’s role in their awards.

In the article you state: “The new GI Bill covers full in-state undergraduate tuition and fees at any public college…(but) Congress also wanted to help veterans attend often pricier private schools. So the new bill offers them an amount equal to the tuition at the most expensive public college in the same state. That penalizes veterans going to private colleges in states that have kept their public university tuition low.”

While that is true, it only affects the student veteran if the private school in question is ungenerous to military veterans seeking to matriculate there. Private institutions have been invited, and have until mid-July, to enroll in a VA-administered program called Yellow Ribbon. Under the Yellow Ribbon program, private colleges and universities agree to waive up to half of the tuition and fees charged above those imposed by the most costly state-run school. The Department of Veterans Affairs, i.e., the federal government, in turn, matches the waived amount. This results in no out-of-pocket tuition and fee payment by the veteran. This program also benefits veterans enrolled in graduate programs or who are seeking coverage of out-of-state tuition and fees. Over 700 private schools have signed up for this program.

In the unique case of California, the State Approving Agency informed VA that no tuition is charged to in-state students pursuing a degree at a public college or university. Based upon this information, VA cannot legally pay for tuition charged to out-of-state veterans or veterans pursuing training at a private institution under the Post 9/11 GI Bill in the state of California. Title 38 U.S.C. 3313 requires that VA limit tuition and fee payments under the Post 9/11 GI Bill in each state to the highest rate of tuition and fees charged to in-state undergraduates by the public institutions located in such states. However, veterans attending a California college or university that charges fees may receive up to $6,586.54 to cover those fees (based on 2008-2009 rates).

While the statute limits the amount that VA can pay for tuition and fees based on in-state maximums, most resident veterans pursuing a degree at a public institution in California will not have any out-of-pocket expenses. Also, the California institutions have the option of participating in the aforementioned Yellow Ribbon Program to reduce expenses that exceed the highest in-state maximums. It should be mentioned that it is the schools that are the direct recipients of the GI Bill educational benefit payments for tuition and fees, not the veteran-students themselves. The students receive stipend and cost of living payments alone.

These clarifications should not signal complacency on the part of The American Legion with regard to the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Our organization, which was instrumental in the authoring of this and its predecessor legislation, is continuing its advocacy for improvements to the bill. We wish to ensure that wherever the veteran desires to pursue post-service education, in degree or non-degree programs, he or she will not be subject to out-of-pocket educational expenses.

The American Legion has strongly supported the major enhancements to the post WWII Montgomery GI Bill and is grateful to the
House and Senate members that passed this bill and to the President who signed this vital piece of legislation. The new Post 9/11 GI Bill is the commendable product of dedicated lawmakers and advocates and is certainly well deserved for the men and women who have protected, sacrificed, and served our country honorably.

Sincerely,

David K. Rehbein
National Commander

AP IMPACT: New GI benefits vary widely by state

By JUSTIN POPE

When the new GI Bill kicks in Aug. 1, the government's best-known education program for veterans will get the biggest boost since its World War II-era creation. But the benefit is hardly the "Government Issue," one-size-fits-all standard the name implies.

In fact, depending on where service members and veterans decide to attend college, they could receive a full ride, or very little.

An Associated Press review of state-by-state benefits under the new bill shows huge discrepancies in the amount veterans can receive.

For example:

_ Veterans attending New Hampshire colleges like Dartmouth might get $25,000 from the government each year, and in Dartmouth's case essentially a free ride, thanks to an additional grant from the Ivy League school. But in neighboring Massachusetts, it is a different story. At that state's numerous private schools - many just as expensive as Dartmouth - the government's baseline tuition benefit is only about $2,200 a year.

_ Veterans who choose a private school in Texas could get close to $20,000 a semester from the government for a typical course load. Those picking schools in California will get nothing for tuition.

The explanation stems from the formula the government created, as well as a much-criticized decision by the Department of Veterans Affairs on how to implement the law.

The new GI Bill covers full in-state undergraduate tuition and fees at any public college. That's far more generous than the old GI Bill, which provides a monthly stipend that is the same from state to state.

But Congress also wanted to help veterans attend often pricier private schools. So the new bill offers them an amount equal to the tuition at the most expensive public college in the same state.

That penalizes veterans going to private colleges in states that have kept their public university tuition low.

As a result, the new GI Bill is a great deal for such vets in states like New Hampshire, New York and Texas; a pretty good one in states like Ohio; and hardly any deal at all in Massachusetts and especially California, where the state constitution prohibits public universities from charging tuition. Instead, California's public universities typically charge "fees" of several thousand dollars per year.

Critics argue the Department of Veterans Affairs misinterpreted the law and should have combined tuition and fees in coming up with reimbursement levels. That would have put the total California benefit at around $13,000 per year.

Anthony Brooks, a 26-year-old former Army Ranger who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, will get a mere $5,000 toward the $38,570 tuition charged at the private University of Southern California - and half of that comes from USC through the government's Yellow Ribbon matching-grant program.

"It's depressing, actually. It's putting states up against each other," said Brooks, who plans to become a doctor. He added: "We all fought for our country. It just seems unfair."

The VA says its hands were tied by Congress.

"It is a valid question concerning why we would pay X in State A versus how much we would pay in State B, but the statute defines the kinds of programs we would account for," said Keith Wilson, the department's director of educational services.

Congress passed the Post 9/11 GI Bill last year, offering veterans the most significant expansion of educational benefits since the original GI Bill in 1944. The VA expects nearly half a million veterans to participate in the coming year.
The benefits - including new, separate stipends for housing and books - kick in after three years of active duty, and some of them are transferable to family members.

Rep. Howard "Buck" McKeon, R-Calif., has introduced legislation that would correct the discrepancy in California.

"California's generosity on state tuition was intended to keep college costs down, not inadvertently increase costs for the state's veterans," said Lindsey Mask, a spokeswoman for McKeon.

In the meantime, education and veterans groups are fielding calls from veterans confused over how much they can get.

"What should be a simple number has turned into some kind of Frankenstein-like monster that nobody will be able to understand," said Terry Hartle, senior vice president of the American Council on Education.

About 80 percent of veterans tapping the new bill are expected to attend public institutions. But some of the remaining 20 percent - those planning to attend private colleges, graduate schools, and the for-profit institutions that are hugely popular with veterans - are angry.

"On paper, this is an amazing new GI bill. It's an amazing plan," said Matthew Collins, a former Army specialist who started a Facebook group criticizing the system.

He plans to attend California Baptist University, affordable only because it is making a $10,000-per-veteran contribution under Yellow Ribbon - something many California colleges are unable to offer.

"I just don't think they truly thought it through," Collins said.

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