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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Congress needs to pass GI Bill improvements before recessing

WASHINGTON (Sept. 27, 2010) -- The American Legion is urging Congress to pass substantial improvements to the Post-9/11 GI Bill before it recesses for upcoming elections. Senators and representatives could go home to campaign as early as Friday.

Legislation introduced May 27 by Sen. Daniel Akaka, D-Hawaii, would provide education benefits to some National Guard and Reserve members who were inadvertently left out of the original legislation passed in June 2009. The Post-9/11 GI Bill covers full tuition at any public college or university for eligible veterans.

The American Legion's national commander, Jimmie Foster, has been meeting with senators and representatives to discuss his organization's legislative priorities for veterans' issues and benefits. Foster testified Sept. 22, before a joint session of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs committees.

"As I've been meeting with congressional members on the Hill, I've been thanking them for the great benefits included in the original Post-9/11 GI Bill," Foster said. "But I've also reminded them that our work remains unfinished as long as those who continue to sacrifice for our country aren't able to take full advantage of their benefits."

While the 111th Congress has introduced more than 25 pieces of legislation to revise the GI Bill, perhaps the most comprehensive one is Akaka's "Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Improvements Act of 2010." It would expand education benefits beyond degree-granting institutions by including most programs approved under the Montgomery GI Bill, such as vocational programs, on-the-job training, apprenticeships, flight training and correspondence courses.

Akaka's legislation is also known as "the new GI Bill 2.0," according to Robert Madden, assistant director of The American Legion's economic division. "This legislation would provide valuable job training for all veterans, allowing them to become productive members of the work force. GI Bill 2.0 would provide equitable benefits to all veterans serving today," he said.

The proposed improvements would also ensure that National Guard and reserve members get full credit for their active duty, including mobilizations for natural disasters. Veterans enrolled more than half-time in distance-learning courses would also qualify for monthly housing allowances.

According to The American Legion's legislative director, Tim Tetz, both the Senate

version (S. 3447) and the House companion bill (H.R. 5933) – introduced July 29 by Rep. Walter Minnick, D-Idaho – have struggled for passage by their committees, much less by the full Congress.

"Like many pieces of legislation that are passed, the Post-9/11 GI Bill was a tremendous step in the right direction. Now it's important that Congress addresses some significant oversights in the original law," Tetz said.

"We understand that Congress has a lot on its mind, with elections looming on the horizon," said Peter Gaytan, executive director of The American Legion in Washington. "But many veterans across America can't take advantage of their education benefits as the law is currently written. We're asking Congress to take swift action on this matter, and pass the bill introduced by Senator Akaka before it recesses."

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