

Servicemembers Improved Transition through Reforms for Ensuring Progress (SIT-REP) Act
Sponsored by Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) and Sen. John Boozman (R-AR)

Background

The Post-9/11 G.I. Bill provides education benefits, including a monthly living stipend, to over 775,000 student veterans and eligible dependents. In order for a student veteran to receive benefits under this law, the student must file an online claim with Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to receive a certificate of eligibility (COE) and their college's or university's school certifying official must verify the following information to VA: 1) the student's enrollment, 2) the length of the academic term or training period, and 3) the number of credit hours. This process can occur independently or concurrently.

Unfortunately, delays in the processing of tuition payments – either by unintendedly slow processing by the VA or errors by school certifying officials – have caused some student veterans to endure financial hardship and be denied access to their education. According to the VA, in FY2017, the average time to process all education claims was approximately 25 days for original claims and nine days for enrollment certifications.¹ The student veteran advocacy group Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) has observed that there are “issues with many institutions of higher learning demanding payment from the student because of delayed VA payments,” and that “students receiving VA payments were not allowed to attend classes, register for Spring 2018 or use campus facilities (library, health center) because the VA payment was delayed. In some cases, students were put on payment plans they could not afford or forced to take out student loans with egregious origination fees in order to continue their education program.”²

As a result of delays created by either unintendedly slow VA processing or school administrator error, some schools put a hold on a student veteran's account or force the student to begin payment of tuition and fees on a payment plan until the school receives G.I. Bill funds from the VA.

The upcoming implementation of the *Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act* (Forever G.I. Bill) on August 1, 2018 has expanded eligibility for Post-9/11 G.I. Bill education benefits.³ In the event that expanded eligibility leads to more participants in the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill program, the Forever G.I. Bill's implementation may result in a higher volume of claims that must be processed by the VA and schools. That is why we must ensure that schools do not impose unnecessary fees, deny access to school resources, or compel their students to obtain loans to address financial gaps resulting from delays in the processing of payments to the educational institutions.

¹ Department of Veterans Affairs, “Statement of Robert M. Worley II, Director, Education Service, Veterans Benefits Administration,” Before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, December 12, 2017, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR10/20171212/106695/HHRG-115-VR10-Wstate-WorleyIIUSAFRetM-20171212.pdf>.

² Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS), “Statement of Ashlynn Haycock, Manager, Education Services,” Before the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, March 20, 2018, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR10/20180320/108011/HHRG-115-VR10-Wstate-HaycockA-20180320.pdf>.

³ Department of Veterans Affairs, “Forever GI Bill - Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act,” <https://benefits.va.gov/GIBILL/FGIBSummaries.asp>.

Legislation

To ensure that student veterans are not forced to endure additional financial burdens and are not denied access to school resources due to delayed processing of G.I. Bill benefit payments, the ***Servicemembers Improved Transition through Reforms for Ensuring Progress (SIT-REP) Act***:

- Prohibits a college, university, or training program from adopting a policy in which it imposes a late fee on eligible student veterans, denies them access to school resources (*i.e.*, classrooms, libraries, etc.), or requires them to take out additional loans due to a delayed G.I. Bill benefit payment from the VA to the school.
- In the event of a delay by the VA in issuing a G.I. Bill benefit payment directly to a school, the school is prohibited from imposing late fees on student veterans and denying them access to school facilities for up to 90 days after the school certifies tuition and fees. This provision would apply only to benefits that are paid directly to the school.
- Allows the VA Secretary to waive these two aforementioned prohibitions when appropriate.
- Requires the VA to distribute payments to the school within 60 days from when the school certifies tuition and fees for the student.
- Mandates a report from the VA to Congress twice a year with a summary of any cases in which delayed G.I. Bill disbursements occurred and an explanation for the delays.

Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-FL) and Rep. Ann Kuster (D-NH) introduced the original legislation (H.R. 4830) in the House of Representatives on January 18, 2018.

Endorsements

- Tragedy Assistance Program For Survivors (TAPS)
- Veterans Education Success
- The American Legion
- Veterans of Foreign Wars
- National Military Family Association
- Student Veterans of America
- American Council on Education (ACE)