

Veterans Corner  
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GI Bill changes

The National Defense Authorization Act of 2008 made several changes to the GI Bill for reservists. The Reserve Educational Assistance Program (REAP) is a Department of Defense education benefit program designed to provide educational assistance to members of the Reserve components called or ordered to active duty in response to a war or national emergency as declared by the President or Congress. The following changes were put into effect as of 1/28/08 unless otherwise noted:

Change #1 – The monthly REAP is based on the amount of time you are mobilized for. New legislation has made the 80% rate available to anyone who was mobilized for at least 2 continuous years of active duty or served multiple mobilizations totaling 3 years or more after 9/11/01.

Change #2 – Eligible REAP participants may now participate in the “buy-up” program. Reservists may pay up to \$600 to increase their monthly rate of pay by as much as \$150.00 per month (must be member of Ready Reserve component).

Change #3 – REAP participants who separated from the Selected Reserve after completing their service contract (under other than dishonorable conditions) and then return, are now eligible for REAP benefits for 10 years after they are separated.

Change #4 – Modified ending dates for MGIB-SR participants involuntarily separated. Members, who were involuntarily separated from the Selected Reserve due to a unit deactivation between 10/31/07-9/30/14, are now eligible for MGIB-SR for a period of 14 years from their original date of eligibility.

Change #5 – Retention of REAP eligibility during breaks in Selected Reserve Service. Reservists who have a break in service, regardless of length, maintain their eligibility to REAP, as long as they continue to serve in another component of the Ready Reserve (such as IRR or ING) during the break. This provision of the law is retroactive to 9/11/01.

For more information call toll free 1-888-442-4551.

Claims Backlog

In fiscal Year (FY) 2007, more than 2.8 million veterans received disability compensation benefits. Providing quality decisions in a timely manner has been, and will continue to be, one of the VA's most difficult challenges. A majority of the claims processed by the Veterans Benefit Administration (VBA's) 57 Regional offices involve multiple issues that are legally and medically complex and time consuming to adjudicate.

As of February 2, 2008, there were 653,595 claims pending in VBA, 400,386 of which are rating cases. There has been a steady increase in VA's pending claim backlog since the end of FY 2004, when there were 321,458 rating cases pending. At the end of FY 2007, there were more than 391,000 rating cases pending in the VBA system, up approximately 14,000 from FY 2006. Of these, more than 100,000 (25.7%) were pending for more than 180 days. Including non-rating claims pending, the total compensation and pension claims backlog was more than 627,000 with 26.5% of these claims pending more than 180 days. There were also more than 164,000 appeals pending at VA regional offices, with more than 142,000 requiring some type of further adjudicative action. At the end of FY 2007, the average number of days to complete a claim from the date of receipt (182.5 days) was up 5.4 days from FY 2006.

Inadequate staffing levels, inadequate continuing education, and pressure to make quick decisions, resulting in an overall decrease in quality of work, has been a consistent complaint among Veterans and advocates.

### SONYMA

Veterans are eligible for a mortgage with the State of New York Mortgage Agency (SONYMA) at a low interest rate. For more information call 518-434-2118 or visit [www.nyhomes.org](http://www.nyhomes.org).

### Education Benefits for Returning OEF/OIF Veterans

Requests for education benefits from OEF/OIF veterans are receiving priority review and processing at VA in order to expedite opportunities for these newest combat veterans. VA's Education Service provides education programs and benefits to qualified veterans, service members, Reservists, and dependents.

Information about the following educational programs and the applications process is available on the internet at [www.gibill.va.gov](http://www.gibill.va.gov) or by calling 1-888-GIBILL.

### Frequently Asked Questions:

*Am I Eligible for VA dental care?*

You are eligible for dental services if your dental care is for either a compensable service-connected condition, a dental condition resulting from service-connection trauma, if you have a service-connected rating of 100% or rated unemployable due to service-connected conditions. You also qualify if you are a former POW, a participant in a VA vocational rehabilitation program, an enrolled homeless veteran participating in specific health care programs, or if your dental condition is aggravating a medical problem under VA treatment. In addition, recently discharged veterans who served on active duty 90 days or more and who apply for VA dental care within 90 days of separation from active duty may receive a one time treatment for dental conditions if the veterans certificate of

discharge does not indicate that the veteran received necessary dental care within the 90-day prior to discharge or release.