

Veterans Corner
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By: Robert G. Mitchell

VA Seeks Temporary Contractor to Help Process Education claims

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) issued a solicitation for temporary contractor support to assist in processing the increased volume of education claims revived since implementing the new Post 9/11 GI Bill.

“This contract will assist VA in delivering education benefits to out veterans as quickly as possible,” Said Under Secretary for Benefits Patrick Dunne. “Veterans are depending on VA to provide the benefits they earned through their service to our nation. We will do everything in our power to minimize delays for our veteran-students.”

The post 9/11 GI Bill, which went into effect on August 1, 2009, has generated an unprecedented number of new applications. When combined with the standard high volume of school enrollment claims in August and September (normally, the busiest months for education claims), the number of claims has exceeded anticipated levels.

The contractor will provide its own work site and personnel to perform claims processing tasks. Contract staff will validate enrollment information provided by schools and provide recommendations on claim status to VA personnel, who will finalize claims decisions and generate payments (if applicable).

All work will be reviewed and authorized by VA personnel; VA will provide training on security and claims processing procedures. The contract personnel will assist in handling the least complex cases, which allows for rapid implementation of this initiative.

Information about the Post 9/11 GI Bill, as well as VA’s other educational benefit programs, is available at VA’s Web Site, www.va.gov, or by calling 1-888-GIBILL-1.

VA Claims up 59% since 1999

The number of claims processed by VA has increased some 59% since 1999, according to a Government accountability Office report released in July. Between 1999 and the end of fiscal year 2008, processed claims increased from 458,000 to about 729,000.

During the same time, the number of pending claims increased some 65% to about 343,000. To handle the growing number of claims, VA has increased its processing staff by about 58% since 2005.

Military Looking for \$60 Billion in Savings in Budget

The Department of Defense (DOD) will need to come up with \$60 billion in savings over the next five years to pay for new priorities set by Defense Secretary Robert Gates. The order is based on an assumption that defense budgets will largely be static in fiscal years 2011 through fiscal 2015 – a radical departure for a department whose budgets have increased more than 80% since 2001. Pentagon officials say new spending priorities will be driven by the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), an ongoing review and analysis of the nations military structure meant to guide planning and program decisions. The Pentagon has already begun the QDR process and expects to present its final report to congress in early 2010.

President, VA Secretary Cite PTSD as Priority

President Obama and Veterans' Affairs (VA) Secretary Eric Shinseki discussed a broad range of veterans' issues including the Administration's commitment to tackling the causes behind Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and providing resources to help those experiencing it. "There is a direct connection between the problems of PTSD and the pace of military operations," Obama told military reporters, adding that PTSD may be curbed by reducing "the amount of time service members spend in theater without a break." Steps taken to increase the size of the Army and Marine Corps, the services most heavily stressed with deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, and plans to end policies that keep some service members in uniform beyond the terms of their enlistment contracts (stop-loss) are aimed at reducing stress and the incidence of PTSD.

New Initiatives for Female Veterans

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) recently announced new initiatives to support women veterans. The plans include comprehensive primary care and specialized medical care at every VA medical center; enhanced mental health care specifically for female vets; staffing every VA medical center with a women veterans' program manager; improving communication and outreach to women vets; and continuing the operation of organizations such as VA's Center for Women Veterans and the Women Veterans Health Strategic Healthcare group.

Earlier this year Penny Collins, FRA's director of membership development and coast Guard Veteran, participated in a House VA Committee discussion on the special needs of women veterans. The forum highlighted the need for increased training for VA staff, some of whom have misconceptions about the needs and contributions of women vets or fail to acknowledge that some issues impact female veterans differently than their male counterparts.

Mentors Ready to Help Vets Find Jobs

A New York Based non-profit group announced in September that it had launched a program to match returning war veterans seeking employment with business executives willing to help. The executive director of Veterans across America says the Champion

Mentor Program will provide veterans the tools they need to complete for quality employment, or start businesses.

“There is a tremendous need for this mentor program as unemployment and underemployment among veterans is rising daily,” Dr. Ray Healey said. Healey added that the program matches vets with business executives based on similar life and work experiences. For more information about the program, contact Dr. Ray Healy or Wesley Poriotis at 212-684-1122.

November Brown Bag Lunch “The USS Saratoga”

Larry Gordon will present the USS Saratoga on November 12th in the Dutcher Community Room at the Saratoga Springs Public Library at 12 noon. Our city’s namesake played a significant role in US History dating back to 1780.

Larry Gordon is nationally recognized as the USS Saratoga’s Historian, which happened by chance. Over 25 years ago, Larry was asked to be the Saratoga County liaison by the Kesselring Site to a group of Saratoga sailors coming to visit. He quickly studies up on the USS Saratoga to be able “to talk shop”. That was the beginning. Today, Larry has collected volumes of memorabilia and artifacts that fill his basement and the guest room of his home, including a truly historic collection from the US naval Cancellation Society and a collection of correspondence from crew members that span decades. Six ships carried the Saratoga name and today Saratoga Springs, is home to its Silver Service and its Bell.

The Brown Bag Lunch Series is co-sponsored by the Saratoga Springs Heritage Area Visitor Center and the Saratoga Springs Public Library. For further information, call the Visitors Center at 587-3241.