

Statement of:

Reserve Officers Association of the United States

and

Reserve Enlisted Association

before the

Veterans Affairs Committee
United States Senate

Improvements to the Post-9/11 GI Bill

SR-418 Russell – July 21, 2010



“Serving Citizen Warriors through Advocacy and Education since 1922.”™



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The Reserve Officers Association of the United States (ROA) is a professional association of commissioned and warrant officers of our nation's seven uniformed services, and their spouses. ROA was founded in 1922 during the drawdown years following the end of World War I. It was formed as a permanent institution dedicated to National Defense, with a goal to teach America about the dangers of unpreparedness. When chartered by Congress in 1950, the act established the objective of ROA to: "...support and promote the development and execution of a military policy for the United States that will provide adequate National Security."

The Association's 65,000 members include Reserve and Guard Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, Airmen, and Coast Guardsmen who frequently serve on Active Duty to meet critical needs of the uniformed services and their families. ROA's membership also includes officers from the U.S. Public Health Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration who often are first responders during national disasters and help prepare for homeland security.

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The Reserve Enlisted Association is an advocate for the enlisted men and women of the United States Military Reserve Components in support of National Security and Homeland Defense, with emphasis on the readiness, training, and quality of life issues affecting their welfare and that of their families and survivors. REA is the only Joint Reserve association representing enlisted reservists – all ranks from all five branches of the military.

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DISCLOSURE OF FEDERAL GRANTS OR CONTRACTS

The Reserve Officers and Reserve Enlisted Associations are member-supported organizations. Neither ROA nor REA have received grants, sub-grants, contracts, or subcontracts from the federal government in the past three years. All other activities and services of the associations are accomplished free of any direct federal funding.

Introduction

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee on behalf of 1.1 million Reserve Component members, the Reserve Officers Association (ROA) of the United States and the Reserve Enlisted Association (REA) of the United States expresses its appreciation for the opportunity to submit testimony about improvements to the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Chairman Akaka's bill S.3447 is truly appreciated and encouraging.

As contingency operations bring about increased mobilizations and deployments, many outstanding citizen Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen have put their education on hold while they serve their country in harm's way. Since September 11, 2001, more than 750,000 Reserve and Guard service members have been mobilized, with nearly one third of those having been deployed more than twice. The Reserve Components have and continue to earn the benefits of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, unfortunately some are still left out.

Discussion

A better educated veteran makes for a better contributor to a workforce; ROA and REA suggest the following improvements be made to the Post 9/11 GI Bill.

ROA and REA urge the committee to include Title 14 and 32 orders for eligibility of the Post 9/11 GI Bill.

The new bill corrected a measure that currently leaves out members of the National Guard and Reserves with Title 32 service and would create full eligibility for benefits under the new legislation. While ROA and REA fully support this measure we are concerned that similarly the Coast Guard Reserve members under Title 14 orders are still being excluded. Coast Guard active and reserve members can receive credit for the Post 9/11 GI Bill under Title 10 orders, but those under Title 14 cannot. Title 14 orders include Coast Guard mobilizations to natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina, Midwest Floods, and Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, and Active Duty Special Work orders for Homeland Security Operations.

ROA and REA support the addition of on the job training (OJT) and apprenticeship programs, to the Post 9/11 GI Bill.

With rising unemployment, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom National Guard and Reserve service members, and transitioning veterans need the opportunity to gain new skills, education, and experience to compete for jobs especially in our current difficult economic situation.

It is suggested that the time served since 9/11/2001 be fully credited, and earlier \$\$ payments under Montgomery or other GI Bills be deducted from the value of the earned Post 9/11 benefits.

Many military members who started their service under the Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB), paid into the benefit and as students received a set amount per month as determined by the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA). While they still may qualify for additional education under the Post 9/11 GI Bill, they end up losing benefits because eligibility is based on months of use rather than the cash received for those benefits. For example an ROA member who called headquarters served in the US Army Reserve and was recalled to active duty to serve two more tours. The service member qualifies for only one year's worth of the Post 9/11 GI Bill from his duty time, but he loses the remainder of his eligibility because of the MGIB benefit utilized. He was paid only about \$4,000 of MGIB benefit for his education, which basically covered the cost of gas and parking during his commute. The monthly payments he received from the VA

were only about \$140 per month which does not compare to the current Post 9/11 benefit or the costs of a college education.

ROA and REA recommend enacting the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) and Servicemembers Civil Relief Act (SCRA) protections for mobilized Guard and Reserve students granting academic leave of absences, protecting academic standing and refund guarantees.

Also interest rates should be adjusted on Federal student loans of mobilized reservists when the market rate drops below 6 percent.

Reserve Component members have served honorably alongside active duty members, making numerous sacrifices over the past nine years. Yet their benefits are not necessarily comparable to their service. Suggested changes are available for review. ROA and REA are willing to work with the committee staff to explore improvements to both USERRA and SCRA to better protect both active duty and Reserve component students.

ROA and REA support initiatives to change reimbursement rates not using a state tuition cap.

The state by state cap on tuition and fees should be eliminated and replaced with a national ceiling for tuition and fees. Reimbursement would cover the full cost of tuition and fees for almost everyone taking undergraduate classes at a public college or university.

For those attending private schools, paying out of state tuition at public institutions, or enrolled in graduate or doctoral classes, they would be paid up to the national cap based on the average cost of tuition and fees for full-time undergraduates at in-state rates for four year public colleges and universities.

ROA and REA encourage Congress to maintain vigilant oversight to ensure adequate funds are found and that they are dispersed fairly.

The Department of Defense (DoD) and other Federal agencies would be responsible for funding the transferability of eligibility benefit (TEB) program for spouses and dependents. Also DoD would be responsible for administering TEB changes after service member's separation or retirement.

Conclusion

The Reserve Officers Association and the Reserve Enlisted Association, again, would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to present our testimony. We are looking forward to working with you, and supporting your efforts in any way that we can.