

GI Bill has homework left to do

Demand for Post-9/11 GI Bill overwhelms Veterans Affairs system, but officials see a smoother road ahead.

Veterans nationwide struggled through the fall semester, waiting on the hype of the Post-9/11 GI Bill to pay off. As many students applied for benefits, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs was overwhelmed, much as critics had predicted. Understaffed offices, outdated technology and mass confusion among many college advisers left thousands of veterans waiting on housing and tuition payments.

Tom Tarantino, a Legislative Associate for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, acknowledges that the first semester of implementation was a disaster on many fronts.

“The VA was really not prepared for

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the volume of people that ended up using the GI Bill,” Tarantino said. “Even though the actual number fell well short of the estimate, it still completely crippled their system.”

Officials now say most veterans have received their full benefits for the fall semester. According to the VA, they have paid out more than \$1.3 billion in education benefits to more than 183,000 students since the program began in August.

This year, the VA has hired 530 additional employees, bringing the total to 1,200 claims processors. They have also

awarded a temporary contract to assist with processing and are making good on promises to deliver benefits by Feb. 1.

Even with the progress, there are still problem areas. Some schools won't certify students until after the add/drop period, leaving those veterans without a living allowance for months. Others enrolled in school only to be met with confusing state caps on tuition that required them to cover much of the cost.

“One of the reforms we are really pushing for is to get rid of the caps,” Tarantino said. “The whole point of the GI Bill was that a veteran could get an undergraduate public education for free. So just pay the bill.”

Of the thousands of veterans who applied for the new benefit, more than 30 percent were issued advance payments in late 2009 as an emergency measure to provide a living stipend while the students waited on regular payments.

In January, the VA announced that they'll begin recouping the payments, but nothing has been made clear about how the process will work.

Keith Wilson, VA's director of education services, thought the payments were helpful in allowing students to focus on their schooling instead of their checkbooks, but realizes timely repayment is necessary.

“Now, we can get to the business of closing the books on advance payments and focus on supporting veterans for the spring semester,” Wilson said.

The new GI Bill could be, after some growing pains, one of the best benefits veterans have seen in half a century.

“I think in five or ten years,” Tarantino said, “all anyone is ever going to remember is that we are helping to build another greatest generation and it's going to be a great thing.”

For details on the Post 9/11 GI Bill, go to www.gibill.va.gov or www.newgibill.org.