



THE UNDER SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS FOR BENEFITS  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20420

JUL 26 2013

Dear Higher Education Executive,

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has provided over \$30 billion in Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to over 990,000 Servicemembers, Veterans, and their families. We could not have provided these well-earned benefits to these deserving individuals without your support. I extend my sincere appreciation for the spirit of cooperation that exists between your institution and VA.

We understand that effective and timely communication is a critical in ensuring that we are providing great service to our Veterans, partners, and stakeholders. Educational institutions play a key role in educating Veterans on changes to VA programs, and we stand ready to assist you as needed. We created a hotline to provide School Certifying Officials (SCOs) with immediate access to VA education case managers to answer questions and resolve Veteran-specific claims requiring an expedited review. We also published an SCO handbook which serves as a comprehensive guide on enrollment certification procedures. We regularly update the handbook and issued an updated version in June 2013. Additionally, we hold quarterly interactive webinars to answer questions, receive feedback, and share best practices among the SCO community.

We are grateful to the institutions that have implemented policies to assist Veterans and their families in getting enrolled in school and getting benefit payments as soon as possible. We are aware that many of you have extended billing flexibility to allow Veterans to remain enrolled until VA payments are received – without charging interest or other negative consequences. We are also aware that many of you have also begun submitting enrollment certifications before tuition and fees have been determined to ensure that Veterans receive prompt payment of any housing or book allowances due. We offer additional ways you can assist us in issuing timely payments in the attached enclosure. These small steps go a long way to ensure that our Veterans are able to work toward their educational, vocational, and/or professional goals.

We have made great strides with the development of our paperless IT education system called the Long Term Solution or LTS. Our vision has been to automate a greater number and type of Post-9/11 GI Bill claims to achieve an end state in which the majority of claims are processed with minimal human intervention, all with the sole purpose of expediting claims decisions and payments. The LTS is processing approximately 50% of Post-9/11 GI Bill supplemental claims through end-to-end automation. During the Fall Semester, prior to automation, the average processing time for supplemental Post-9/11 GI Bill claims was 23 days. Due to the increased

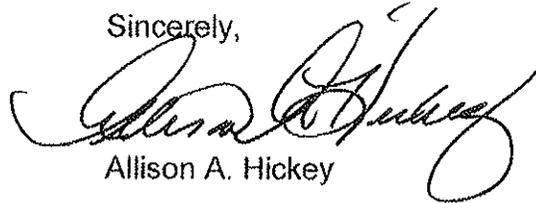
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processing capability gained from automation, the average processing time to adjudicate education claims has improved greatly. At the end of the Spring 2013 term, the average processing time for Post-9/11 GI Bill was 5 days for supplemental claims. Extended delays are not routine for education claims. If Veterans at your school are experiencing extended delays please call the dedicated SCO Hotline or notify your Education Liaison Representative.

Thank you for your support of our Servicemembers, Veterans, and their families to ensure they take full advantage of their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits. We are confident that by working together, we can continue to provide quality services that allow them to successfully transition from military service to civilian careers.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Allison A. Hickey", written in a cursive style. The signature is positioned above the printed name.

Allison A. Hickey

Enclosure

## **WAYS EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS CAN ASSIST WITH TIMELY VA EDUCATION PAYMENTS**

**Ensure your School Certifying Official (SCO) submits enrollment certifications to VA as quickly as possible, preferably before the start of the school term.**

- By law, the tuition and fee payments to schools and the monthly housing allowance and books/supplies stipends paid directly to Veterans are triggered by receipt of enrollment certifications submitted by your School Certifying Official (SCO). The law prohibits us from paying benefits to beneficiaries or their schools until we receive certification of their enrollment; no funds can be authorized “up front.”
  
- Alternatively and before the start of the school term, submit enrollment certifications with “\$0” marked in the tuition-and-fees field to confirm enrollment and allow VA to begin paying monthly housing and books-and-supplies stipends early.
  - As soon as possible thereafter, SCOs should follow with an amended certification once tuition and fees are finalized.
  - It is important to submit both the initial (\$0 tuition and fees) and amended certifications as soon as possible for VA to timely pay students.

**Encourage Veterans to routinely interface with the SCO on campus. Your SCO is the key connection point between the school and Veterans who are utilizing their benefits.**

- The SCO should remind Veterans that making changes to the number of credit hours (dropping or adding classes) impacts benefit payments – and may result in indebtedness to VA – but will most certainly impact the timeliness of their benefits as VA re-processes their claim.
  - Today, Veterans’ drop/add actions account for more than 50 percent of the total 4.4 million claims transactions VA completes each year.
  - Veterans are responsible for overpayments, which can result in monies subtracted from their future housing allowance payments.
  - Your SCO can help VA in educating Veterans on the impacts that these changes have on the timeliness of their benefits.

**Veterans' housing allowance is paid by law in arrears – at the end of the month, not the beginning – and is apportioned by the period of time the school is operational for the month. VA would appreciate any assistance you can provide to your local student-housing communities in understanding this issue.**

- This means that if the fall semester starts on 20 August, the Veteran is paid at the end of August and only for the remaining 11 days in August – not the full month.
- If a Veteran drops a class that shifts him/her from full-time status to part-time status, this decision also impacts the Veteran's living stipends.

**Ensure SCOs stay connected with VA for program updates and to address questions or problems.**

- SCOs have direct access to VA Education Call Center Representatives (ECCRs) to help resolve difficult questions involving benefit payments – including claims requiring expedited processing for financial and other hardships. ECCRs can be reached through the SCO Hotline at (855) 225-1159. This is a VA-established phone line reserved only for SCOs, not students.
- Online SCO training is available at [www.gibill.va.gov/school-certifying-officials](http://www.gibill.va.gov/school-certifying-officials). There has been regular turnover of SCO positions nationwide. Please help by encouraging your SCOs to complete all applicable training and stay current on new rules and issues while in these positions.

**Provide Veterans awaiting GI Bill payments with information on available financial assistance**

- SCOs can advise Veterans to take advantage of available financial and enrollment assistance often offered to Veterans through school programs and non-profit organizations
- Connect Veterans with Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), including Student Veterans of America and state-level departments/offices of Veterans affairs, whose local branches offer special assistance to Veteran students.

**Provide Veterans information on the student overpayment process**

- The student's debt is electronically submitted to VA's Debt Management Center (DMC). Within 10 days of receipt of the debt, DMC will issue a first demand letter to the student regarding the overpayment.

- Upon notification of the debt, the student should immediately contact VA'S DMC regarding the debt. The response should be sent (in writing) directly to the office sending the letter, unless otherwise stated.

Debt Management Center  
P.O. Box 11930  
St. Paul, MN 55111-0930  
1-800-827-0648  
Website: [www.va.gov/debtman](http://www.va.gov/debtman)

Business hours are 7:30 am to 12:15 pm and 12:45 pm to 6:00 pm, Central Time