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

December 13, 2012

Dear Higher Education Executive,

Each year, more and more Servicemembers and Veterans across the country are taking advantage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, a comprehensive education benefit that was created by Congress in 2008 and has been administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) since 2009. In the past three years, VA has provided more than $24.4 billion in tuition and benefits to over 870,000 Veterans, Servicemembers, and their families, and to the universities, colleges, and trade schools they attend. We expect the number of Veterans and family members pursuing educational opportunities to rise over the coming years as the military services undergo reductions in overall active duty strength, and separating Servicemembers seek to become career-ready through use of the valuable benefits provided by the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

We recognize that timely payment of GI Bill benefits has sometimes presented challenges to students and their schools, and we are eager to work with our educational partners in making the payment process more effective for all involved parties. The Post-9/11 GI Bill program is very complex, and we know you understand the size, as well as the importance, of the program we administer. We are writing this letter to ask for your help in improving the benefit payment process.

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." The earlier the certifications are received, the earlier these payments can be made. We appreciate that this program limitation can result in financial difficulties for students and schools, and we offer some suggested ways you can assist in this process in the enclosure. These suggestions are not new, and we know that many institutions have already demonstrated their commitment to helping us in these areas. However, your reemphasis of their importance within your administrative operations would be very much appreciated.

We also extend our sincere appreciation to the institutions that have assisted Veterans experiencing payment delays through informal loans of money and/or books. In those instances where tuition-and-fee payments are pending, we ask that you continue to extend billing flexibility to allow Veterans to remain enrolled until payments are received – without charging interest or other negative consequences. If your school has difficulty with timely VA payments, it is most productive if you direct those concerns to VA, not the student, through the special SCO hotline mentioned in the enclosure.

Additionally, we are actively seeking your ideas on how to improve the process. We plan to hold an interactive webinar in January 2013, where we can listen to your suggestions and share ideas. More detailed information will be forthcoming.

Thank you for your continued support of our Veteran students and your dedication to ensuring the Post-9/11GI Bill program serves them in the best way possible. By continuing to work closely together, we can help Veterans succeed in their transition from military service to student life and successful civilian careers.

With best wishes as the Fall semester comes to a close.

Sincerely,

Allison A. Hickey
Under Secretary for Benefits

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.

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- 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 to help resolve difficult questions involving benefit payments – including claims requiring expedited processing for financial and other hardships. VA Call Center Representatives 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. 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.