This we'll defend

Voice of Congress

Better education benefits

Sen. Blanche Lincoln, D-Ark.
Member,
Senate Finance Committee

Earlier this year, I offered an amendment to the 2006 Defense Authorization Act on behalf of the brave men and women of our National Guard and reserve who have sacrificed so greatly for our freedom.

This amendment, which passed the Senate by unanimous consent, would allow members of the Selected Reserve who have been activated for extended durations to utilize some of the educational benefits they've earned once they separate from service.

Since World War II, providing educational benefits to returning service members has served an invaluable role in stimulating recruitment and retention for our armed forces.

In assisting veterans readjusting to civilian life, these educational benefits have also enhanced our nation's competitiveness through the development of a more highly educated and productive workforce.

Photo by Staff Sgt. David Strobel

Benefits: Soldiers from the New Mexico and Arkansas Army National Guard direct an Army helicopter pilot to position a sandbag at the Braithwaite Scarsdale levee in north Plaquemines Parish, La., following damage by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

When the Montgomery GI Bill was signed into law in 1984, members of the Selected Reserve were seldom mobilized. Consequently, standard Montgomery GI Bill benefits reflected that reality.

That is not the same reality today.

More than 500,000 members of the National Guard and reserve have been called up since the terrible events of Sept. 11, 2001, and more than 70,000 have pulled two or more tours of duty.

In my state of Arkansas, nearly 3,400 of our National Guard's 39th Infantry Brigade recently returned from service in Operation Iraqi Freedom. These citizen-soldiers served with distinction and did so in some of the worst conditions imaginable.

While their families and their communities have welcomed them home with open arms, our nation should do the same by ensuring they receive the benefits and services they need as they transition back to their civilian lives.

The rising price of higher education, increases in the interest rates on student loans – and the limited earnings ability of those who return from service with only high school credentials – make educational benefits a primary means of helping members of the Selected Reserve make that transition.

In addressing this issue, Congress took a step in the right direction in October 2004 with the creation of the Reserve Education Assistance Program.

This program provided enhanced Montgomery GI Bill benefits for members of the Selected Reserve who were activated since Sept. 11, 2001, and mobilized for more than 90 days in response to a contingency operation (a war or national emergency as declared by the president or Congress)

Although increasing benefits was a step in the right direction, it did not address the lack of a readjustment or transition component to these educational benefits.

As a result, active duty service members have up to 10 years after their separation of service to utilize their MGIB benefits, while members of the Selected Reserve must forfeit all the educational benefits they have earned once they separate from the Selected Reserve.

Montgomery GI Bill benefits continue to be the only benefit that those who have served Selected Reserve activated duty in the war on terrorism may not access when they eventually separate or retire.

For example, a young man enlists in the Arkansas National Guard for a six-year commitment after graduating from high school in 2001. He is mobilized in June 2005 and will return home from Iraq in September 2006, a 15-month mobilization.

He plans to complete his service in June 2007 and use the Montgomery GI Bill benefits he earned during his mobilization to attend the University of Arkansas.

Under current law, he would forfeit all of these benefits once he leaves the guard.

I believe our young men and women who have fulfilled their service obligations deserve better than that.

Specifically, my amendment would allow members of the Selected Reserve to have portability of their Chapter 1607 Montgomery GI Bill benefits for up to 10 years from their last date of service.

Lincoln

To clarify, this amendment applies only to their Chapter 1607 benefits (those they have earned through activated service) and not their standard Selected Reserve educational benefits (Chapter 1606 benefits).

Some have raised concerns that this amendment would have an effect on retention because it would provide a post-service portability of benefits.

I disagree.

There are many valid personal and family reasons that influence a volunteer's decision to serve.

Military analysts have consistently noted that reenlistment bonuses in lump-sum cash payments have been effective in meeting or exceeding re-enlistment goals in the active and reserve forces, not the educational benefits that are deferred over time.

Further, there is a built-in incentive to continue serving in the Selected Reserve because re-enlistment or extension in the guard and reserve enables the service member to retain their standard Selected Reserve Montgomery GI Bill benefits under Chapter 1606 – with the potential to acquire more Chapter 1607 benefits through successive activations.

If they re-enlist, they would also remain eligible for any other educational incentives such as federal tuition assistance and state guard or reserve educational benefits.

Young high school graduates thinking about furthering their education and joining the guard or reserve should know that they will earn Montgomery GI Bill benefits by joining the reserves and even more if they are called up.

When it is time to re-enlist, they can keep all earned educational benefits by staying in, or can take with them into civilian life the benefits they earned when they were called up to defend our nation.

As the daughter of a Korean War veteran, I was taught from an early age about the sacrifices our troops must make to keep our nation free, and I have been grateful for the service of all our brave men and women from Arkansas and across the nation.

Congress must work on behalf of them and their families to ensure they are provided with the benefits, pay and health care that they have earned.

It is the least we can do for those whom we owe so much and to reassure future generations that a grateful nation will not forget them when their military service is complete.