



**NCOA**

**Non Commissioned Officers Association of the United States of America**

225 N. Washington St

Alexandria, Virginia 22314

Telephone (703) 549-0311

**STATEMENT OF  
KIMBERLEE D. VOCKEL  
DIRECTOR OF LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS**

**BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON BENEFITS  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**ON  
H.R. 1291  
THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY MONTGOMERY GI BILL ENHANCEMENT ACT**

**JUNE 7, 2001**

**DISCLOSURE OF FEDERAL GRANTS AND CONTRACTS**

The Non Commissioned Officers Association of the USA (NCOA) does not currently receive, nor has the Association ever received, any federal money for grants or contracts. All of the Association's activities and services are accomplished completely free of any federal funding.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Non Commissioned Officers Association (NCOA) is grateful to Chairman Hayworth and the distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Benefits of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee for the opportunity to express our views concerning H.R. 1291—"21<sup>st</sup> Century Montgomery GI Bill Enhancement Act" sponsored by Chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, Christopher Smith.

The veterans' education benefit is one of NCOA's top legislative priorities because of the impact this issue has on our members and their families. However, this issue has implications that reach beyond this Association. The nation's security rests on the quality and expertise of those individuals who serve in the armed forces. With the technological advancement of military operations, a more educated warfighter is needed. As of December 31, 1998, there were only 40,198 enlisted service members out of 1,153,442, a mere 3.48%, who have a college degree<sup>1</sup>. In addition to the need to provide the means for servicemembers to obtain an education while on active duty, it is imperative that substantive education benefits be provided for those who choose to pursue their educational goals after leaving military service. It is for these reasons that the NCOA is grateful to the Subcommittee for addressing this issue and for allowing this Association to outline several key recommendations for the improvement of H.R. 1291.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCEMENT OF H.R. 1291**

The current Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) falls short of offering a substantive education benefit to active duty service members and veterans. The NCOA strongly supports the enhancements proposed by Chairman Smith and his distinguished colleagues in H.R. 1291. This bill proposes a much needed increase in the rates of the basic educational assistance under the Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB); however, the NCOA believes that there are more deficiencies in the MGIB that need to be addressed to make it a viable source of education funding.

The following is NCOA's list of recommendations for the improvement of the MGIB.

- A. There should be an open enrollment period offered to every service member who, for whatever reason, did not enroll in either VEAP or MGIB.
- B. The ten-year limitation on drawing from the MGIB benefit should be eliminated.
- C. There should be no enrollment fee for service members.
- D. There should be accelerated or lump-sum payment options available.
- E. Transferability should be offered to those who have bought into the MGIB but have chosen to not pursue further education.
- F. The proposed raise in benefits in H.R. 1291 should be designed to close the gap between rising education costs and actual benefits received, and it should continue to keep pace with the education costs in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/almanac/>

## **JUSTIFICATION FOR NCOA RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **A. OFFER OPEN ENROLLMENT**

Many members of the active duty force currently serve in the military without any education benefits. There are many servicemembers who entered military service between the period of the Vietnam-era GI Bill and VEAP when there was no education benefit available, thus leaving those servicemembers to retire without an education benefit. However, several other common situations have occurred that have diversely affected enrollment in the MGIB. Numerous members of this Association entered the armed services while the VEAP option was being offered, and they were discouraged from enrolling. In fact, a number of personnel who enrolled in VEAP were encouraged by their leadership to close their accounts, as VEAP was deemed inadequate. When the MGIB was implemented in 1985, personnel already on active duty were denied access to the benefit. In addition, many active duty members were unable to enroll in the MGIB because of the financial burden of relinquishing ten percent of their first year's salary to sign on to the benefit program. In some cases, servicemembers were too young or overwhelmed to make such a decision while in basic military training, especially when faced with a one-year pay reduction. It is for this reason that the NCOA strongly urges the Committee to include an open-enrollment option to H.R. 1291, as well as an elimination of the first-year enrollment requirement. Servicemembers should have the option to enroll in the MGIB open to them at any point during their military career.

### **B. ELIMINATE THE DELIMITING DATE**

NCOA supports amending the current ten-year delimiting date to authorize veterans indefinite access to their benefits. The ten-year delimiting date, or any finite access window, is a barrier to veterans seeking a higher education. It is unfathomable to the NCOA that a benefit, especially one bought into with one's own money, can simply vanish according to some arbitrary deadline. Due to family obligations and the inadequate benefits offered by the current MGIB, many veterans are unable to financially handle pursuing a college education for many years after leaving the military. Some veterans are not able to pursue their educational goals until their eighth or ninth year following separation from military service. NCOA suggests that the delimiting date be eliminated to enhance the appeal of the MGIB, and that elimination would make the MGIB more inclusive to more veterans.

### **C. ELIMINATE THE CONTRIBUTION**

The veterans' education benefit has the distinction of being the only federal education program that requires a monetary contribution from the program participant. In its current form, the MGIB simply cannot compete with other financial aid programs available to high-school graduates and their parents. The \$1200 contribution is a hardship on new servicemembers, which discourages enrollment. The NCOA strongly believes that those men and women who faithfully serve this great country should not be burdened with a contribution that other government financial aid programs do not require. If the military services wish to use the MGIB as a recruiting tool, the benefit must be enhanced and the \$1200 pay reduction must be eliminated. This Association has maintained this position for many years and will continue to work toward the elimination of the contribution. The burden of this fee is excluding too many servicemembers whose service to their country should be payment enough.

### **D. ACCELERATED AND LUMP SUM PAYMENT OF BENEFITS**

NCOA believes that VA should be authorized to pay, and veterans should have the option to elect, an accelerated payment based on educational goals and institutional requirements. A veteran should not be denied admittance to a college or vocational training program because the required up-front costs are too difficult to obtain. Similarly, VA should be authorized to pay, and veterans should have the option to elect, a lump-sum payment at the start of a course or program if required by the institution and consistent with the educational goals of the veteran. Veterans should be able to withdraw from their total entitlement when the cost of a training course exceeds the benefits payable for courses of short duration. These are changes that are needed to give veterans greater purchasing power with their MGIB benefit.

### **E. TRANSFERABILITY OF UNUSED BENEFIT**

Many career servicemembers are able to achieve their educational goals prior to separating from military service, and as a result they do not use the MGIB benefit into which they contributed \$1200. Because of limited income, most are not able to set aside significant savings for their children's education. Consequently, many servicemembers view their MGIB investment as wasted. NCOA advocates the incorporation of the transferability option into H.R. 1291 for all eligible veterans who have entered career status, typically at the end of the second term of enlistment. This Association is strongly opposed to granting discretionary authority to the DOD or the individual military services as a means of selectively allowing only some members the transferability option. The MGIB should have universal appeal, and granting discretionary authority is tantamount to granting the practice of discrimination. Surely there are some career fields within the services that are in desperate need of manning; however, using the MGIB as a tool to retain members in some career fields and not others is a discriminatory tool that alienates those members in other, more manned, career fields. Finally, the NCOA recommends that the Committee limit control over transferability to veterans as a means of excluding the MGIB from divorce proceedings.

## **F. BUILT-IN ANNUAL INDEXING OF BENEFITS**

The MGIB must reflect the actual cost of education for it to be a substantive benefit. The proposed increase in H.R. 1291 is greatly appreciated; however, by 2004 when the proposed adjustments have been implemented, the MGIB will once again be insufficient to cover the cost of an education. This will require yet another effort to update the benefit. Unless an indexing provision is built into H.R. 1291, the benefit will once again fall short of fulfilling its promise to the veterans of the armed services. The benefit should cover the costs of tuition, books, and fees. The NCOA urges the Committee to tie the value of the benefit to a standard established by the actual cost of education as spelled out in the annual Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac (i.e. the College Board report) which reports average annual college costs for a commuter, non-resident student. This is the only way that the MGIB can fulfill its promise to those who faithfully serve their country.

## **CONCLUSION**

NCOA would like to thank Chairman Hayworth and his distinguished colleagues for the invitation to submit this important statement regarding H.R. 1291. This Association greatly appreciates the Committee's time and interest in this statement. H.R. 1291 is a great first step toward correcting the deficiencies in the current MGIB; however, NCOA would be neglectful if the previously stated suggestions for improvement were not offered. The recommendations made in this statement are both feasible and easily implemented and should be incorporated into H.R. 1291 immediately.

**KIMBERLEE D. VOCKEL**  
**DIRECTOR OF LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS**

As Director of Legislative Affairs for the Non Commissioned Officers Association, Mrs. Vockel is responsible for directing and managing the legislative activities of the Congressionally chartered and accredited military and veterans service organization. She is responsible for a wide range of compensation, benefits and quality-of-life issues pertaining to the active, retired, and national guard and reserve military communities and their families, as well as veterans, their dependents, and survivors. She is NCOA's representative for legislative issues in The Military Coalition and the National Military/Veterans Alliance.

A summa cum laude graduate from George Mason University, Mrs. Vockel joined the staff of the Non Commissioned Officers Association's National Capital Office in May 2001. She is the first woman, as well as the first military spouse, to hold this position at the NCOA. She received her Bachelor's Degree with highest honors and distinction in Government and International Politics and a minor in Philosophy.

Prior to joining the NCOA, Mrs. Vockel worked as a Legislative Correspondent/Press Intern in the United States Senate assisting in the research of various issues.

Military service has always been a tradition for Mrs. Vockel's family. Most notably, her grandfather is a disabled veteran having fought in WWII, and he was wounded at the Chosin Reservoir during the Korean Conflict. Her stepfather was a WWII veteran having served at Pearl Harbor, and her uncle served in the Navy in Vietnam. Her brother served in the Marine Corps, and her husband is currently serving in the Air Force.

Mrs. Vockel is married to Air Force MSgt. James P. Vockel of Traverse City, Michigan. They currently reside in Woodbridge, VA.