

Mr. Robert E. Clark, Assistant Director for Accession Policy Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel & Readiness

Prepared Statement

of

Mr. Robert E. Clark, Assistant Director for Accession Policy
Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel & Readiness

Before the

Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs

“Implementation of the New Post-9/11 GI Bill
Looking Back and Moving Forward”

April 21, 2010

NOT FOR PUBLICATION
UNTIL RELEASED BY THE COMMITTEE

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and esteemed members of the Committee. I am pleased to appear before you today to discuss the Department of Defense’s (DoD) role in the implementation of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, as enacted in Public Law 110-252, and codified in Chapter 33, title 38, United States Code. There is little doubt this new educational assistance program represents the most sweeping change in post-service education benefits since World War II.

The original “GI Bill of Rights,” created at the end of World War II, gave returning Service members a comprehensive package of benefits to compensate for opportunities lost while in the military, and to ease their transition back into civilian life. The noted economist, Peter Drucker, described that GI Bill by saying, “Future historians may consider it the most important event of the 20th century.” Perhaps the most far-reaching provision of the GI Bill was the financial assistance it made available for veterans to attend college. The GI Bill offered returning Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and Airmen payment for tuition, fees, books, and supplies, along with a living stipend, at the educational institution of the veteran’s choice. With over 7.8 million veterans receiving education or training, this landmark program changed the face of higher education, and many have said directly led to the creation of the American middle class.

Although there have been several GI Bills since the original, the Post-9/11 GI Bill is the first to directly mirror this original milestone program, again offering the returning Soldiers, Sailors, Marines and Airmen payment for tuition, fees, books, and supplies, along with a living stipend, at the educational institution of the veteran's choice. However, one difference is the original GI Bill was designed to ease the transition to civilian life from a conscripted military force during a massive drawdown during a short period of time. Today's military is much different -- since 1973, we have defended this Nation with a volunteer force, and our military forces maintain a consistent level of stability without massive drawdowns. Therefore, along with a codified purpose to "...assist veterans in readjusting to civilian life after wartime service..." the Post-9/11 GI Bill also is designed to have a positive effect on recruitment for the Armed Forces.

The Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) has been a cornerstone of our military recruiting efforts since 1985, and a major contributor to the success of the All-Volunteer Force. Money for future education has been and remains at the forefront of reasons young Americans cite for joining the military. There is no doubt that the Post-9/11 GI Bill will continue to have this impact.

For today's hearing, you asked me to comment on the role DoD has played in the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, and how DoD and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) have and continue to work together to ensure success in the administration of this new program. This strong relationship between DoD and VA during the first year of the Post-9/11 GI Bill has clearly been a team effort benefiting Service members, veterans, and their families. Specifically, DoD has three major roles in this implementation.

The Department's first role in the successful implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill is the sharing of service data with VA. We recognize the road to becoming a veteran always entails passage through service in the military. Accurate reporting of that service is vital to the determination of eligibility for all post-service education benefits. We recognize our role in that reporting.

Since 2003, the Department has been providing automated daily updates to Service member and veteran personnel data to VA. From the day the person enlists or is commissioned into the military, DoD sends a record to VA, and we update this information as it changes. All of this is stored in VA's VA and DoD Information Repository (VADIR). This is accomplished by means of a once-daily replication of the Defense Enrollment and Eligibility Reporting System (DEERS) to VADIR. With the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, we have included the identification and transfer of those family members to whom the Service members have elected to transfer their educational benefits in VADIR. This provides VA with daily updates to approved Service member transfers of this benefit, and allows VA to administer payments.

For those instances where there are questions about a Service member's or veteran's record, we have in place an effective and direct line of communication between the VA Regional Processing Offices and each of the Service Components. DoD provides VA a list of Service Points of Contact who are able to provide immediate responses either via telephone or e-mail. Through this formalized process, VA claims examiners have the ability to quickly get updates or clarifications.

The second and third roles DoD plays in Post-9/11 GI Bill implementation both stem from two special provisions in the statute – the ability to offer a supplemental educational benefit, commonly referred to as “kickers,” and the ability to offer eligible career Service members the opportunity to share or transfer their earned, but unused, education assistance benefits to their immediate family members.

“Kickers” as authorized in section 3316, title 38, United States Code, allow the Services to provide additional monthly educational assistance to recruit or retain members with critical skills or specialties and for incentivizing additional service. Following the model of the very effective MGIB “College Funds” used since the 1980s, these “kickers” will assist the Services in recruiting high quality youth into critical and hard-to-fill military specialties, encourage these young men and women to serve for longer terms of service, and incentivize service in the Selected Reserve for those who separate. Unfortunately, even though “kickers” are authorized under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, the statute as written does not allow us to use them. The current MGIB “College Funds” are funded by the military Services, but administered and paid by VA through the use of the DoD Education Benefits Fund (EBF). For each “College Fund” offered, the Service makes an actuarially determined deposit into the EBF, and when the Service member or veteran uses the benefit, VA includes the supplemental amount in the payment to the individual and draws reimbursement from the EBF. To allow the Services to use Post-9/11 GI Bill “kickers,” we requested a technical amendment in our 2011 legislative proposal package for the FY 2011 National Defense Authorization Bill to allow the Service to make deposits into the EBF and for VA to draw reimbursement from the EBF for “kickers” associated with the Post-9/11 GI Bill education benefits.

DoD’s third major role is the implementation of the provision that allows the Secretary of Defense, for the purpose of promoting recruitment and retention, to permit certain members of the armed forces to elect to transfer all or a portion of their unused educational entitlement to a spouse and/or child. Family members and quality of life groups throughout the Department have supported transferability of education benefits. Due to the requirement that members must commit to additional service to be eligible to transfer unused education benefits, transferability is a significant incentive for continued service. The transferability process is a shared responsibility -- with DoD accepting and approving the request to transfer, and VA administering the transferred benefit just as they administer benefits for Service members and Veterans.

In implementing our responsibilities under this provision, DoD established a Web-based paperless process for approval and submission to VA, the Transferability of Educational Benefits (TEB) system. Career Service members, either active duty or selected reservist, log into TEB, a secure site, with their common access card or unique ID and password. TEB provides them a screen that shows all family members who are enrolled in DEERS and eligible for military benefits. The individual may then select the family member(s) and enter the number of months of benefit each receives. This request goes to the Service for approval. The Service verifies the member has completed the required additional service commitment and approves the request. Approved requests are shared with VA on a nightly basis through VADIR, as earlier described. Transferability has been well received by our career force. To date, over 105,000 requests from career service members have been approved - transferring months of benefit eligibility to over 240,000 family members.

DoD is committed to the success of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. From the beginning, we started outreach to both our internal and external audiences. To support recruiting, the Post-9/11 GI Bill has become an integral part of both Service and joint advertising. To support retention, we established a special page on Defense Link for the Post-9/11 GI Bill, participated in numerous interviews and roundtables, published a final rule on DoD implementation in the Federal Register, and printed information and links to VA Post-9/11 GI Bill web sites on Leave and Earnings Statements for all military members. The Department has been working very closely with the VA Education Service since enactment, and will continue to work side-by-side with VA staff. The Post-9/11 GI Bill will have major impacts on DoD recruiting and retention. Recruiting and retention are the critical goals that guide how we implement this program. We recognize our duty to staff the All-Volunteer Force with high-quality, motivated, and well-trained men and women. As we move through the 21st Century, we must continue to build upon the remarkable legacy of the visionaries who crafted the original and preceding versions and improvements to the GI Bill. I thank this Committee for its continued, dedicated support to the men and women everywhere who currently serve and to those who have served our great nation. I will be happy to answer any question you might have at this time.