

Vermont National Guard Tuition Waiver Program Whitepaper

Purpose: The purpose of the proposed legislation is to reform the current National Guard Education Assistance program from “interest free” loans to any Vermont College/University that can be forgiven, to a 100% tuition waiver program for attendance at Vermont State Colleges and Universities.

Background: Currently guard members apply for a share of the \$250,000 that is provided to the Vermont National Guard Education Assistance Program to apply toward tuition at any Vermont College or University. The average award is between \$4000 - \$6000. This is originated as an “interest free” loan that can be forgiven if the member fulfills their military obligations.

The proposed tuition waiver legislation is an attempt to put the Vermont National Guard on parity with its neighboring states who all offer tuition waiver for guard members at state colleges and universities not withstanding residency status. Currently, the Vermont National Guard can't effectively compete for recruits that have a desire to serve in the National Guard but also want to pursue higher education. The recruiters have anecdotal cases where high school students (particularly communities around the fringes of Vermont) are being advised to check into the National Guard in neighboring states (e.g. Massachusetts, New Hampshire and New York). In fact, there are current Vermont National Guard members that have children who have joined the National Guard in neighboring states and are attending college tuition free.

The proposed legislation has an imposed performance criteria as well as an extended service commitment (2 years of service in the Vermont National Guard for each year of education).

The intent is to continue the current Education Assistance Program to support current enrollees that don't want to transfer to a state college or university and would sunset in 2021. The recommendation is that the new program would receive \$500,000 as a baseline and the existing \$250,000 funding for the current program would supplement the new funding as it becomes available.

Benefits/Outcomes: The implementation of a 100% tuition waiver program in Vermont for the National Guard would help meet both the National Guards goals and the Administrations objectives to increase recruiting, increase post-secondary enrollment in state colleges and universities, keep our young people in Vermont (Guard service commitment), provide an affordable education to individuals that will set the standards in the academic community and help develop our future leaders in the guard and the community.

A secondary benefit to the state is the fact that a strong National Guard directly benefits the state in the event of emergencies/disasters

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

Q: How will the program be administered?

A: The Vermont National Guard (VTNG) will receive the applications from the perspective soldier/airmen and once accepted will provide the application and all supporting documentation to the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation (VSAC) for execution. The funds will be appropriated to the Military Department who will transfer the funds to VSAC who will disburse to the various Vermont State Colleges and Universities. VSAC in coordination with the VTNG will monitor eligibility and any subsequent administrative actions.

Q: Who will be eligible and will there be any limitations?

A: Any VTNG member that is pursuing an undergraduate degree or certificate. The intent is that the VTNG Education Bill will be an entitlement and not subject to availability of funding on a first come – first serve basis. This would be in keeping with our neighboring states that offer 100% tuition waiver. This aspect will be critical since the VTNG Education Bill will be a significant kingpin to the overall recruiting and retention of our members. The VTNG will be possibly be entering in to an enlistment contract with the potential understanding that the member will be able to attend a Vermont State College or University tuition free once they've completed basic training and met all other eligibility criteria. Based on historical data from other states approximately 5-6% of NG member utilize the program. For Vermont that would translate to 195 -235 enrollees.

Q: How much will the program cost?

A: The recommendation is that the new program would receive \$500,000 as a baseline and the existing \$250,000 funding for the current program would supplement the new funding as it becomes available. Every year the VTNG and VSAC will review prior year enrollments and budget for the next academic year. This request would be submitted during the normal budget build with the option to adjust at mid-year point with a Budget Adjustment Act (BAA) request.

Q: Will this program apply to both resident and non-resident members of the Vermont National Guard?

A: The intent is to treat all members of the Vermont National Guard as Residents for the purposes of charging tuition to the student and seeking reimbursement. The rationale is that a member of the VTNG take an oath to the Governor of Vermont.

Example: If an event occurs that impacts the greater New England area and the member lives in Connecticut, the soldier/airmen, if called to State Active Duty would report to their unit in Vermont and support the citizen of Vermont (not Connecticut).

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Q: Is there a service commitment tied to the program in exchange for tuition waiver?

A: Member of the Vermont National Guard will sign a contract that obligates them to two (2) years of service with the Vermont National Guard for each academic year of tuition waiver. If the members lose eligibility or discontinue their service with the Vermont National Guard, they will be billed for the tuition cost on a pro-rated basis. The Adjutant General will have the latitude to waive the repayment based on circumstances.

Q: What happens to the current Education Assistance program?

A: The intent is to continue funding the current program through the end of FY2021 to allow guard members attending non-state colleges and universities to complete their program. As funds, free-up from the current program they would migrate to the Tuition Waiver program.

Q: Who is the target audience for the tuition waiver program?

A: The program will be open to all Vermont National Guard members that are pursuing a degree/certificate up through a bachelor's degree. However, the tuition waiver program is primarily being looked at as a recruiting tool targeting the newly graduated Vermont high school students that are interested in the military and would like to pursue higher education. Once they complete basic training they would be eligible to start using the benefit. This reinforces the goal to support state colleges and universities. Coupled with a two-year service commitment for each academic year they use the program, the program will keep young people in Vermont and in the communities.