

Recruitment and mission readiness enters critical stage for the Vermont National Guard

H.72 and S.195 represent investments into Vermont's workforce of tomorrow and sustainability of the VT National Guard

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 benefit program for attendance at Vermont State Colleges and Universities or up to UVM Resident Tuition at a Private College or University in Vermont and Skills Training Certificates.

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 administered by VSAC that can be forgiven if the member fulfills their military obligations.

The proposed 100% tuition benefit legislation is an attempt to put the Vermont National Guard on parity with its neighboring states who all offer 100% tuition as an entitlement for National Guard membership at state colleges and universities not withstanding residency status. The Vermont National Guard cannot effectively compete for recruits that have a desire to serve in the National Guard but also want to pursue higher education or certificate skills training. The recruiters have cases where high school students (particularly communities around the fringes of Vermont) are being advised to check into the National Guard in neighboring states. In fact, there are current Vermont National Guard members with children who have joined the National Guard in neighboring states and are attending college tuition free. In the last year alone, the Vermont Army National Guard under recruited by 50 soldiers and the Air National Guard under recruited by 60 Airmen leaving 350+ vacancies across the ranks of the Vermont National Guard. On a national level and locally the number one recruiting incentive is education benefits. The proposed legislation has imposed performance criteria as well as an extended service commitment (2 years of service to the State of Vermont in the Vermont National Guard for each year of education).

The intent of H.72 and S.195 is to roll-over the current National Guard Education Assistance Program by transitioning current enrollees to the 100% tuition benefit program upon enactment of the proposed legislation. The recommendation is the new program would receive an additional \$640,000 along with the existing \$250,000 funding for the current program to establish a new baseline of \$890,000.

Benefits/Outcomes: The proposed legislation aims to assist with legislative priorities to keep young people in Vermont by offering education options early in their decision process in exchange for a service commitment to the State of Vermont. This program will grow an educated, skilled and vetted workforce while ensuring the Vermont National Guard can accomplish its federal and state mission.

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 benefit. 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 entering in to an enlistment contract with the understanding that the member will be able to attend a Vermont State College or University tuition free or up to UVM Resident Tuition at a Private College or University in Vermont and Skills Training Certificates 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. Utilization of the current program is approximately 2% of VTNG members.

Q: How much will the program cost?

A: The recommendation is that the new program would receive an additional \$640,000 along with the existing \$250,000 funding for the current program to establish a new baseline of \$890,0000. 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).

Q: Is there a service commitment tied to the program in exchange for 100% tuition benefit?

A: Members 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 benefits. 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: NGEAP would sunset with the enactment of the new legislation.

Q: Who is the target audience for the 100% tuition benefit 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 100% tuition benefit program is primarily being looked at as a recruiting tool targeting the newly graduated high school students that are interested in the military and would like to pursue higher education or certificate skills training. Once they complete basic training they would be eligible to start using the benefit. This supports the goal to support post-secondary education in Vermont. 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.

Another important factor is with the 100% tuition benefit being an entitlement, the Vermont National Guard can be part of the High School's portfolio of options to pursue higher education or skills training early in the guidance process. Therefore, potentially reducing the number of high school graduates that end up in the fringes (non-productive) for a period. Anecdotally, the Vermont National Guard is routinely recruiting young people that have been idle for 2-3 years after high school.