

H.99 National Guard Tuition Benefit Program - 2023

Good afternoon, Mr Chair and Committee –

Thank you for inviting me in to introduce a very limited expansion of last session's ACT 140 (H.517). The program, as we passed it at the end of 2022, extended the opportunity for a National Guard member to obtain certificates, an additional Bachelor's degree, or a Master's degree, up to the UVM rate of tuition, should they wish to enhance their current skill set.

This year's expansion will allow a Guard member to pursue a post-graduate degree program outside of the State of Vermont that is not offered at any Vermont institution, to be reimbursed at the UVM rate of tuition. As an example: there are currently 5 Guard members who are interested in becoming Physician Assistants, and that degree is not offered within the portfolio of programs at any Vermont institution of higher education. During recent discussion with officials at UVM and the Larner College of Medicine, I learned that the barriers to setting up a PA Studies program are vast – not only would the number of highly technical lab spaces being utilized for nursing and medical students need to be expanded, but there is also a shortage of PAs and Doctors who would be available as educators and preceptors for the 2 to 2-1/2 year long program of classroom learning and clinical rotations that a PA completes in various specialties. For these reasons, Vermont does not, and likely will not, have a Physician Assistant Studies Program.

This limited expansion to the program will not cause an increase in the military budget. The baseline budget proposal has room to accommodate the limited requests that the Guard will likely see, and they do not anticipate any additional funding to be required to offer this benefit.

I would like to thank the Guard for bringing this request forward. They are now in the 4th full year of the benefit, and they continue to present opportunities to enhance the program to maximize its benefit to the members of the VT National Guard. Offering these adjustments to the program makes members stronger in their military positions, to their employers, and better contributors to their communities. In this example, assisting members with the cost to become a physician's assistant will enhance their individual education and employment opportunities, and will fill a gap in both the VT National Guard and in the healthcare workforce of Vermont.

Thank you for taking the time today to consider this bill.