



Budget Briefs

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VETERANS BENEFITS LEGISLATION IN 2007-2009 BUDGET

The biennial state budget act, 2007 Wisconsin Act 20, passed by the legislature and signed by Governor Jim Doyle on October 26, 2007, created or enhanced a number of programs designed to aid the state's approximately half-million veterans and their families.

VETERAN REGISTRY

The Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) was directed to establish a voluntary statewide registry to collect information from veterans and inform veterans on health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder, Agent Orange, and Gulf War syndrome. Although not mandated by the act, the department is considering using the personal information provided by the veteran to determine the veteran's eligibility for federal and state veterans programs, including health care assistance, economic aids, and educational benefits. If the department finds that the veteran may qualify for a benefit, it can notify the veteran about his or her eligibility, and give advice as to who to contact to receive help in obtaining the benefit.

DIGITAL IMAGING OF VETERANS' FILES

Act 20 provides \$690,000 in the 2007-2009 biennium to support the electronic document imaging of veterans' basefiles. Veterans' basefiles may contain documents such as reports of separation from the military (DD Forms 214), residency affidavits, applications for various grants (including any required supporting documents), proof of mortgage loan eligibility, denial letters, appeal letters, and marriage and death certificates.

The funding was transferred to the WDVA general-purpose appropriation from the Veterans Trust Fund and the Mortgage Loan Repayment Fund. As of October 2007, WDVA estimated that there are approximately 288,000

basefiles maintained by the department that hold about 5.8 million paper documents. The funds will be used to buy hardware and software, and hire staff to perform the work. Converting the files to electronic form will enhance security and speed up benefits determination and servicing processes.

POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER ASSISTANCE

Act 20 appropriated \$125,000 to provide outreach services to service members and veterans experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The Center for Veterans Issues in Milwaukee will receive \$15,000 per year for outreach services to homeless veterans with PTSD.

The general-purpose funds (\$75,000 in 2007-08 and \$50,000 in 2008-09) supplement the Veterans Assistance Program, which is mainly funded from the Veterans Trust Fund. The Veterans Assistance Program provides temporary housing, counseling, access to medical services, and training to homeless veterans and veterans at risk of becoming homeless to help them become self-supporting.

ASSISTANCE TO NEEDY VETERANS

The act raised the limits on how much health care and subsistence aid eligible veterans may receive through the Assistance to Needy Veterans Program and increased the funding for the program by 11.7% in each year of the biennium (from \$822,000 to \$918,000).

The Assistance to Needy Veterans Program provides emergency financial assistance to veterans to pay for medical treatment and hospitalization for dental, vision, and hearing care. It also provides grants for basic needs such as food and shelter if the applicant has suffered a loss of income due to illness, injury, or natural disaster; has no other assets or income available; and is not eligible to receive aid

from other sources. To qualify, a veteran must earn less than 130% of the federal poverty level income.

Act 20 increased the maximum amount a veteran may receive for subsistence aid from \$2,000 to \$3,000 during a consecutive 12-month period and deleted the maximums that may be provided in a 12-month period for dental care (\$2,500), vision care (\$500), and hearing care (\$1,500). It also raised the total lifetime cumulative amount that a veteran may receive under the program from \$5,000 to \$7,500.

MISSION WELCOME HOME

Act 20 budgeted \$17,000 annually to continue support for the department's "Mission Welcome Home" program. This outreach effort provides grants to persons, communities, and organizations (such as veterans groups and chambers of commerce) who help veterans returning from overseas conflicts successfully make the transition to civilian life.

As part of the program, WDVA provides "Welcome Home" packets to recently separated veterans which outline the variety of available federal and state benefits, eligibility requirements, and application information. The Ambassador Program component aims to provide a link between previous generations of Wisconsin veterans and newly returning servicemembers. Volunteer "ambassadors" assist returning veterans to access veterans-related and community resources via one-on-one mentoring relationships.

RETRAINING GRANTS

Act 20 provided an increase of \$18,000 each year (about 9.4%) to \$210,000 for the veterans retraining grant program. Based on financial need, veterans may qualify for grants of up to \$3,000 a year for job retraining.

To be eligible for a grant, a veteran must generally: 1) be unemployed, underemployed, or have received a notice of termination in the year before applying (but must have been employed for at least six months prior to the loss or reduction in employment); 2) meet financial assistance criteria; 3) plan to enter a retraining program that could lead to gainful employ-

ment; 4) be accepted or enrolled at a state technical college or certified, structured on-the-job training program; and 5) not be receiving assistance under the WDVA's educational grant programs for the same period.

BURIAL AT VETERANS CEMETERIES

Prior to Act 20, a veteran was eligible for burial at a state veterans cemetery if the person died while on active duty in the U.S. armed forces or was discharged or released from active duty under honorable conditions. Now, a veteran is eligible for burial in a state veterans cemetery if he or she was discharged or released under any conditions other than dishonorable (including a "general" discharge).

"WISCONSIN GI BILL" FUNDING

Act 20 provides almost \$11.6 million in funding through the Higher Educational Aids Board to help the University of Wisconsin System and the Wisconsin Technical College Systems pay the cost of tuition reimbursements for Wisconsin veterans and their families.

Eligible veterans may receive waivers of 100% of tuition and fees at any UW System institution or technical college. The benefit may be used for 128 credits or 8 semesters, "whichever is longer." There is no time limit within which the benefits must be used, no income cap, and no restriction on educational level (including graduate courses) for which the credits may be earned. Similar benefits are also available to eligible family members, generally spouses and children of disabled veterans or those killed while on duty. Proposals to limit the benefits were considered but not enacted during the budget process.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For questions or further information about veterans benefits programs, contact the WDVA at (800) WIS-VETS (947-8387) or visit their Web site at <http://dva.state.wi.us/>.

For more information about the "Wisconsin GI Bill," see Legislative Brief 06-17, "Veterans and Military Benefits: Legislation Enacted by 2005-06 Wisconsin Legislature," at www.legis.state.wi.us/lrb/pubs/legbrief.htm.