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WISCONSIN VETERANS' BENEFITS

The biennial state budget act (1997 Wisconsin Act 27), passed by the legislature and signed by Governor Tommy Thompson on October 11, 1997, includes various provisions which expand or modify veterans' benefits.

PEACETIME VETERANS ELIGIBLE FOR BENEFITS

Prior to passage of the budget act, only those veterans who served in the military during a statutorily defined wartime period were eligible for state veterans benefits. Eligibility for most benefits has now been extended to veterans who were on active duty for at least two consecutive years or more (other than training) or fully completed their initial service obligation. Furthermore, veterans who were discharged before completing their required period of service due to a service-connected disability, a hardship, or a reduction in the armed forces may also be eligible. Veterans applying for state benefits must have been Wisconsin residents when they entered military service or have been Wisconsin residents for at least five consecutive years after completing service. They also must be living in Wisconsin when they apply. Programs and services available to peacetime veterans include:

- health care aid, subsistence aid, retraining grants, and tuition and fee reimbursement for full- and part-time study
- personal loans and housing loans
- admission to the Wisconsin Veterans Home at King
- burial provisions
- employment provisions

The Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA), which administers the programs, estimates that 100,000 peacetime veterans will become eligible for benefits under the new law and that expansion of the benefits will cost an additional \$1.04 million for the biennium.

NEW PERSONAL LOAN PROGRAM

Act 27 created the personal loan program (PLP), under which veterans may qualify for 10-year loans of up to \$10,000 to finance: debt consolidation; a business or business property; medical or funeral bills; mobile home purchases; or educational expenses for the veteran, the veteran's spouse or the veteran's children. The PLP is authorized to make loans totaling \$130 million over the biennium. Interest rates are based on the veteran's family income and range from 6% for incomes of less than \$40,000 to 10% for incomes over \$60,000. (Note: Two previous programs for economic assistance loans and consumer loans were repealed by Act 27, but, if the applicant has outstanding loans under these programs, the total indebtedness, including the PLP, cannot exceed \$15,000.)

In some cases, family members related to a deceased veteran may apply for the personal loans. Those eligible include spouses who have not remarried, dependent children (including adult children

under age 26 who are full-time students) and, in some cases, remarried spouses or parents of a veteran's child if the loan is used for the education of the veteran's child.

EDUCATION GRANT PROGRAMS EXPANDED

Under Act 27, qualified veterans may receive tuition and fee reimbursement grants (TFRG) for up to 10 years (previously six years) after their discharge from active military service for courses completed at schools in the University of Wisconsin System or Wisconsin Technical College System. The new law also extends TFRGs to cover Minnesota public schools that have a tuition reciprocity agreement with Wisconsin. Reimbursement is limited to a maximum of 50% of the comparable tuition and fees charged at the UW-Madison for undergraduate courses (or actual cost, whichever is less), but veterans with a service-connected disability rated by the U.S. Veteran's Administration as 30% or higher may be reimbursed up to 100%.

Under the companion program for part-time study grants, veterans may be reimbursed at the same levels as the TFRGs after successfully completing part-time classroom or correspondence courses, but the courses must have occupational, professional or employment objectives. Part-time undergraduates may carry a maximum of 11 credits, but students with a bachelor's degree are limited to eight credits or less. Veterans or eligible dependents who hold master's degrees do not qualify for grants. Students attending out-of-state schools may qualify for the grant if the school is within 50 miles of the Wisconsin border and the course is not offered at a Wisconsin school within 50 miles of the student's residence.

Retraining grants of up to \$3,000 per year are available to recently unemployed or underemployed veterans. Applicants must be engaged in a structured on-the-job training program or be currently enrolled in a technical college or a state-approved proprietary school. Coursework toward a college degree, which previously was allowed, does not qualify as retraining under Act 27.

FUNDING FOR PREVIOUS PROGRAMS

Act 27 increased funding for primary mortgage home loans so that veterans who entered military service after 1976 or who have been out of service for more than 30 years can now participate in the program. Maximum income limits were removed from primary mortgage loans and home improvement loans, so higher income veterans may qualify.

The health care aid grant program will be reinstated with payments limited to \$5,000 for a veteran or dependent over a 12-month period. Combined liquid assets of an applicant may not exceed \$1,000.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For copies of statutes relating to the veterans provisions of 1997 Wisconsin Act 27, contact the Legislative Reference Bureau at (608) 266-0342. For more detailed information about these programs, contact the Department of Veterans Affairs, Division of Veterans Programs at (608) 266-1378.