



Commissioned Officers Association of the U.S. Public Health Service

Gerard M. Farrell
Captain, USN (Ret.)
Executive Director

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President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

I am moved to write by remarks you reportedly made during your recent appearance at George Mason University on the occasion of the effective date of the Post-9/11 GI bill.

You and VA Secretary Shinseki have been quoted as vowing to correct various defects in the law, including the exclusion of National Guardsmen. I want to draw your attention to an even more unfortunate exclusion, which appears to have escaped notice.

When the Post-9/11 GI bill was approved by Congress and signed into law last year, two of our Nation's federal uniformed services were inexplicably left out. The Commissioned Corps of the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS), with an active-duty force of 6,500 officers, and the even smaller National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Corps, with an active-duty force of 300, were omitted, for the first time ever, from a GI Bill and veterans' entitlement.

As the head of the Association that has advocated on behalf of USPHS officers for six decades, I have tried – with partial success – to get this inequity corrected. It persists despite the fact that USPHS officers are defined as veterans in federal law. Title 42 of the U.S. Code, Section 213(d) makes clear that USPHS officers are entitled to “all” programs administered by the Veterans Administration. USPHS officers have participated in (and contributed to) all GI Bill programs since World War II.

After a ten-month campaign by this Association, the Veterans Administration agreed on March 31 that service in the USPHS Commissioned Corps and the NOAA Corps entitles these officers to benefits in the new GI Bill—with one exception. That exception is the popular entitlement known as transferability, which you highlighted in your remarks. This means that USPHS and NOAA officers, unlike veterans of the other five federal uniformed services, cannot transfer their unused educational benefits to their children.

There is some irony in the fact that, at the height of the national debate about health care reform, a uniformed service historically dedicated to improving the health of the public is excluded from this key entitlement. The USPHS Commissioned Corps is unique among

the federal uniformed services. It has 110 years of experience in providing health care to underserved populations in remote areas, plus a rich tradition of sharing its public health expertise with state and local health departments across the country.

You have been quoted as saying that all men and women who serve in uniform to protect our nation's safety and security should be eligible for this important benefit. I agree. USPHS officers deploy with the U.S. Navy on health diplomacy missions around the world. They serve in Afghanistan and Iraq alongside members of the Armed Forces. USPHS officers routinely and regularly deploy alongside National Guardsman in the United States, responding to hurricanes and other public health emergencies. They are charged with protecting the most fundamental component of national security – public health.

I am struggling to explain to these USPHS officers why the Post-9/11 GI Bill treats them differently. What can I possibly say, for example, to the USPHS officers who recently were awarded Bronze Star Medals for their year-long service in Afghanistan? Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines with whom they served can choose to transfer their GI Bill benefits to their spouses and children, but the decorated USPHS officers cannot.

Equally difficult to explain is why our Coast Guardsmen can transfer their benefits while USPHS officers who serve with the U.S. Coast Guard – providing their health care and wearing the Coast Guard uniform – cannot.

On behalf of 6,500 active-duty officers of the USPHS Commissioned Corps and 300 active-duty officers of the NOAA Corps, I respectfully urge you to address this inequity. Please issue an Executive Order or, alternatively, ask Congress to amend the law to extend the transferability entitlement to *all* federal uniformed services.

Very respectfully,



Gerard M. Farrell
Captain, U.S. Navy (Ret.)
Executive Director

Copies to:

DHHS Secretary, Kathleen Sebelius
Assistant Secretary for Health, Dr. Howard Koh
Acting Surgeon General, RADM. Steven K. Galson
Dr. Regina Benjamin
Chairman Daniel K. Akaka
The Military Coalition