

COA Works to Have PHS Commissioned Corps Entitled to New (Webb) GI Bill

11 July 2008 - Whether it was an intentional omission or an erroneous oversight, the fact is that both the PHS and NOAA Commissioned Corps are not included in the entitlement afforded by the new (Webb) GI Bill signed into law by the President on 30 June. COA is pulling out all the stops to have the PHS (and NOAA) Commissioned Corps added to this historic and potentially generous entitlement.

PHS exclusion from the legislation is a surprise. The Commissioned Corps has been entitled to GI Bill benefits for more than 60 years. Title 42 of the US Code is explicit in its language that PHS officers are “veterans” and entitled to participate in all programs administered by the Veteran’s Administration. The problem for the bill’s authors may have been the inclusion of the transferability provision in the new GI Bill.

Educational benefits in the new GI Bill are transferable, under some very strict criteria, to spouses and to children. The transferability clause has generated an explosion of interest among COA members who understandably interpret this as a college scholarship program for their children. DoD drafted these provisions to be applied with “laser focus” to encourage re-enlistments in critical specialties and at key decision points for selected groups of service members. The intent is not to have a broad-based, one-size-fits-all benefit, but rather a carefully controlled tool to be applied in vary narrow situations where the use of this extraordinarily generous benefit is warranted.

There surely are officers with critical skills in the PHS Commissioned Corps who might be enticed to remain on active duty if the entitlement extended to them. COA has been fielding lots of calls and emails from interested physicians, for example. There is no reason that criteria similar to those envisioned by the other uniformed services for this Bill could not be used by the PHS Commissioned Corps to enhance and improve retention where necessary.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that the “old” Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB), to which many PHS officers subscribed upon commissioning, remains in effect. Indeed, benefits under the MGIB are increasing by 20 percent this year and this entitlement will also be transferable under certain criteria.

Right now, there are more questions than answers about how the new GI Bill will work. COA is focused less on the Bill’s mechanics and more on getting the entitlement extended to the Commissioned Corps.

We believe there is a brief window of opportunity to do this and we have asked key Members of Congress to support the inclusion of the Corps. We have enlisted the support of MOAA, ROA, and NAUS and we anticipate the full Military Coalition will weigh in on our side as well.

The support and endorsement by other uniformed service member organizations and The Military Coalition is important, but even more important is the active support and

engagement the Corps' senior leadership in the Department of Health and Human Services. COA has encouraged the Surgeon General, the Assistant Secretary for Health, and the Secretary of Health to personally weigh in on Capitol Hill and publicly demonstrate their support for the Corps they lead.

COA members can help. Call or write the Senate Committee on Veteran's Affairs and your congressional representatives and senators and urge them to make this right. The Chairman of the Senate Committee on Veteran's Affairs is:

The Honorable Daniel K. Akaka
Chairman, Senate Committee of Veteran's Affairs
412 Senate Russell Office Building
Washington, DC 20510-6375

The phone number is 202-224-9126 and letters can be faxed to 202-224-9575.

Contact information for you congressional delegation can be found on the web at:
<http://www.usa.gov/Agencies/Federal/Legislative.shtml>

COA will make effort to keep our membership informed about this important issue.