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NEW GI BILL BRINGS A CRUSH OF VETS SEEKING SCHOOLING

Program's popularity causes bit of a backlog at nation's campuses

By Bill Sizemore
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Kelvin Boone is going back to school at 40, thanks to Uncle Sam's generosity.

The Chesapeake resident retired in 2007 after 20 years in the Navy and started a commercial landscaping and janitorial business. Now he wants to expand, so he enrolled this fall in a business administration and marketing program at Tidewater Community College's Portsmouth campus.

Next summer he plans to take



Kelvin Boone, 40, spent 20 years in the Navy. Now, he's studying business.

horticulture classes at TCC. Ultimately, he hopes to transfer to Old Dominion University and earn a degree in business management. And he's doing it all on the taxpayers' dime.

Boone is among hundreds of thousands of military veterans who are flocking to campuses in Hampton Roads and across the nation thanks to the new Post-9/11 GI Bill, which provides a

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SCHOOLS PUSH BACK PAYMENT DEADLINES

Kelvin Boone, 40, owns a commercial landscaping and janitorial business that has earned clients such as this condo community in Portsmouth. With the aid of the new Post-9/11 GI Bill, Boone is enrolled in a business administration and marketing program at Tidewater Community College's Portsmouth campus.



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full government-funded ride to a college degree.

A signature legislative initiative of freshman U.S. Sen. Jim Webb, D-Va., it's the most generous taxpayer-funded program of higher-education benefits for veterans since the famed World War II-era GI Bill, which sent nearly 8 million vets to college.

Some college benefits were already available to modern-day veterans, but the new program expands them. It covers tuition and fees up to the maximum charged by the most expensive public col-

lege in the state, plus a monthly housing stipend and \$1,000 a year for books and supplies.

"It's so much better than the old one," Boone said. "You can't beat it."

A full ride is even possible at most private schools. Private institutions can opt into the program by offering a discount off their normal tuition, which the government matches.

The maximum benefit—eight semesters of aid—is payable to veterans who served 36 months or more after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. A vet serving as little as 90 days after 9/11 qualifies for 40 per-

cent of the maximum benefit.

Administrators at local colleges say they've been inundated by vets inquiring about and applying for the new program, which began Aug. 1. The military population at campuses in South Hampton Roads this fall is upwards of 7,500, and roughly 1,000 are using the new GI Bill. At some schools, military enrollment is up by one-third or more over last year.

The program is so popular that the Department of Veterans Affairs, which administers it, has been hard-pressed to keep up with demand. Despite the hiring of 750 new claims processors, the

average wait for benefits is six to eight weeks.

But administrators at local schools say they're coping with the delays. Tuition payments are sent straight to the schools, and all local colleges are deferring their normal payment deadlines so students won't be penalized. The housing and books stipends are sent to students. Friday, the VA began dispensing on-the-spot emergency advances of up to \$3,000 to veterans for whom the delay is a hardship.

The advance payments can be claimed in person at regional VA offices. The closest ones to Hampton Roads are in Roanoke

and Winston-Salem, N.C.

Marcus Powell, a retired Marine attending Bryant & Stratton College in Virginia Beach, made the drive to Winston-Salem on Friday. He said he had a one-hour wait for his advance. "They wrote me a check right on the spot," he said. "It was real simple."

Veterans can also apply for an advance online. The VA says checks will be mailed within three business days.

Local college administrators say the delays are understandable.

"It's a new program, and we expected that," said Cynthia Lewis, director of veterans affairs at Norfolk State University.

David Boisselle, director of military affairs at Regent University, said the VA deserves credit for accommodating students who are finding themselves in a bind.

"I counsel them: Just be patient. The money will come in," Boisselle said. "This is an awesome opportunity."

It appears that the earlier a student applied, the shorter the wait for benefits. "I was proactive," said Yasmine Rose, an Army veteran and a senior social-work major at NSU. "I applied in May and got an approval letter from the VA in June. The people who waited until July or August had to wait longer."

Derek Spencer, a Navy retiree, decided to delay enrolling at ODU until next semester, anticipating that there would be glitches as the program got up and running. But he was pleasantly surprised at how easily the process went. "I applied for the benefits back in April and got approved in three weeks," he said. "I was shocked."

Bill Sizemore, (757) 446-2276, bill.sizemore@pilotonline.com

emergency payments

Veterans awaiting GI Bill benefits can get emergency advance payments up to \$3,000 by appearing in person at any VA regional office. Offices are open 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. weekdays. The closest ones are in Roanoke and Winston-Salem, N.C. Veterans must bring a government-issued photo ID and proof of enrollment in school, such as an admission letter.

Veterans can request free van service to the nearest regional office from the Hampton VA Medical Center. Call (757) 722-9961, ext. 3148, from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Mondays through Fridays.

on the Web

For more information or to apply online for benefits, including emergency payments, go to www.va.gov.