Easing the Path to College

BY MICHELLE CAMACHO LIU

eterans and members of the military returning from overseas face a host of challenges—everything from finding a place to live to settling their children in a new school. Nothing may be as important, however, as

the chance to further their education to improve their job prospects.

With the current sluggish economy and high unemployment, veterans are in a particularly tough position. The unemployment rate for vets who have served since 2001 is 11.5 percent, compared with 8.3 percent overall, and for those aged 18 to 24, it's a staggering 31 percent.

Lawmakers have found ways to help those who want to go to school to improve their job prospects as well as the more than 1 million veterans and military members already in college. Lawmakers have supported a number of policies.

Tuition assistance. Military life often requires frequent moves, making it difficult to establish residency to qualify for lower tuition rates. In response, 49 state legislatures allow in-state tuition or other tuition assistance for active military, members of the National Guard or veterans. Forty-four states extend these benefits to military spouses and children.

Help for kids. To support younger military children-many of whom may attend several schools during their elementary and high school years-40 states have passed

legislation to join the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children. Through this compact, states can ease the transitions between schools by allowing kids to quickly enroll in a new school, be placed in appropriate classes, and receive credit for courses to ensure on-time graduation.

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-Representative Ty Cullen (D), Hawaii

Specialized college services. Vets often are nontraditional students-older, with work or family responsibilities; first-generation students; or from low-income households. States can help by providing information about financial aid options, flexible schedules and services to support them through graduation. Almost half



Hawaii (D)

of those who have Ty Cullen served since 9/11 find it difficult to

readjust to civilian life. Last year, Arizona lawmakers created criteria for colleges to be certified as veteran supportive, such as providing orientation specifically for veterans, developing resource centers, training peers to be mentors, and teaching faculty and staff to be sensitive to and aware of military culture. West Virginia also passed legislation in 2010 directing its state colleges and universities to be "veteran friendly" by providing academic and social support to veterans.

Credit for service. Veterans receive rigorous training and experience while in the service. Lawmakers in a few states are considering ways to simplify the system for granting college credit for that military service and training. This involves developing consistent, statewide policies for providing academic credit. At least six states have passed legislation directing boards of education to develop these policies, and at least four state legislatures—Alaska, Florida, Georgia and Hawaii—have introduced similar legislation this year.

"I believe military members and their families deserve some sort of aid from us in gratitude for their service to our nation," says Representative Ty Cullen of Hawaii (D), who is co-sponsoring one such bill. "This opportunity to make college a little more attractive will give them not only the tools necessary to enhance their innate and acquired abilities, but also the skills to help them in the civilian workforce."