

BENEFITS BOOST

Federal, State Agencies Offer Additional Educational Programs to Assist Disabled Service Members, Veterans

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Transitioning out of an active-duty military career and back into an educational environment can be a tough challenge for anyone, but the difficulties are multiplied for service members and veterans who have become fully- or partially-disabled during military service.

Fortunately, there are numerous federal and state programs that are designed to assist disabled service members in maximizing their educational benefits and opportunities. These programs typically can be used prior to or in addition to the Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits; in some cases, disabled veterans can even use these alternative programs for their own educational needs and then transfer their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to their spouse or children.

Overall, military education benefits are designed to help service members, qualified veterans, and qualified family members pay for college tuition, alternative educational programs, or training. These benefits are run by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (<https://www.va.gov/>.) The VA education department also offers career counseling and assistance in finding the right educational facilities.

The most important and comprehensive program for disabled service members and veterans is the federal government's Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) program. According to the VA, "If you're a service member or veteran and have a disability that was caused—or made worse—by your active-duty service and that limits your ability to work or prevents you from working, you may be able to get employment support or services to help you live as independently as possible."

VR&E benefits often can be used before the Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, and these benefits also may last for a longer time. Service members and veterans may be eligible for up to 48 months of VR&E benefits; in some cases, a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (VRC) may approve more than 48 months of VR&E benefits. The VA states, "If you're eligible for both VR&E and another education benefit, you may be able to get more benefits by using VR&E first. If you use VR&E benefits first, we won't deduct entitlement from your other VA education benefits, like the Post-9/11 GI Bill or the Montgomery GI Bill."

Eligibility for VR&E benefits and services is determined by these two factors: 1) The service member did not receive a dishonorable discharge, and 2) the service member has a service-connected disability rating of at least 10% from the VA. In some situations, active-duty service members can apply for VR&E benefits while still in the service: This is the case if the service member has a 20% or higher pre-discharge disability rating and will soon leave the military, or the service member is waiting to be discharged because of a severe illness or injury that occurred while on active duty.

There are numerous services available within the VR&E program, including:

- A complete evaluation to determine your abilities, skills, and interests for employment
- Professional or vocational counseling and rehabilitation planning for employment services
- Employment services such as job training, resume development, and other work-readiness support

STATE PROGRAMS

Many states also provide additional education benefits for disabled veterans, typically offered through state-level Departments of Veterans Affairs, which are separate from the federal VA. Some states also offer education benefits to the spouses and children of disabled veterans.

Additionally, many state veteran education programs offer lower, in-state tuition for veterans, whether or not they are disabled.

The important caveat to state-level benefits is that these vary from state to state: Some states have extremely generous benefit programs, while other states provide more limited allowances. In general, all state programs will require appropriate documentation, including proof of military services and a federal VA disability rating.

- Help finding and keeping a job, including the use of special employer incentives and job accommodations
- On-the-job training (OJT), apprenticeships, and non-paid work experiences
- Post-secondary education and training at a college, vocational, technical, or business school
- Supportive rehabilitation services including case management, counseling, and medical referrals
- Independent living services to help you live as independently as possible

All of these services are accessed through an online application. Once the application is submitted, the service member will be assigned a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (VRC) who will perform an initial evaluation and assist with eligibility concerns, questions, and program benefits. VRCs also assist service members with the transition from military to college life, and can make referrals to VR&E employment coordinators – located at regional VA offices – to help veterans access employment services.

Additionally, if the service member has a disability rating of 100%, or a disability rating of at least 60% and is considered permanently unemployable, the VA provides additional education benefits for certain family members. Family members of some other veterans are also eligible, such as veterans who have passed away due to a service-connected disability or who are missing in action. 