

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 19, 2012

The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki
Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Shinseki:

We are grateful for your ongoing leadership of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and are appreciative of your willingness to work closely with us on behalf of our nation's veterans. Given the numerous challenges confronting the men and women who have served our nation in uniform, it is more critical than ever that we devote the resources and attention they deserve. We write today with concerns the VA is considering a policy that could cause undue hardships for veterans, contribute to the unacceptably high number of unemployed veterans and effectively require schools in Montana and Alaska to take on the role of debt collectors.


Enactment of the Post-9/11 GI Bill was undoubtedly a historic victory on behalf of our nation's veterans and their families, and these increased benefits have provided a new generation with better opportunities to gain the skills they need to compete for jobs in a tough economy. The policy change reportedly being considered by the VA would require veterans with outstanding VA debts to have their tuition benefits withheld. While these veterans are currently subject to having future aid withheld to repay the money they owe, their tuition benefits are exempt. And they are exempt for good reason.

As you know, GI Bill beneficiaries are allowed to enroll in school and begin taking classes before the arrival of their tuition benefits. This practice builds upon the partnerships formed by our schools and the VA to provide service members and veterans with the quality education they have earned. If VA policy is changed to withhold tuition benefits, that veteran would no longer be able to cover the cost of attendance and that debt would simply transfer from VA to the school in which he or she attends. Schools have no means of identifying which veterans have outstanding debts to the VA so this process would unfold after the commencement of classes and after any opportunities to advise that veteran to explore other means of financial assistance. As you know, VA debts are often not posted by Debt Management for years after the origination of the debt – causing even more confusion for the student and schools.

While we understand VA policy must recognize the reality that a veteran's debts must be repaid, it cannot be done in an unnecessarily onerous manner. Withholding tuition benefits to recoup these debts would place veterans at undue risk of financial hardship and jeopardize their ability to gain the skills and education they need to compete in an increasingly competitive job market. In addition, it would place further strain on schools already stretched thin by efforts to administer and advise veterans on the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Our veterans and our schools deserve better.

If the VA is considering such a policy change on debt recoupment, we strongly urge you to reconsider. We appreciate your attention to this matter, and look forward to working with you toward resolution.

Sincerely,



Jon Tester



Mark Begich