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Veterans Education Benefits in Jeopardy

By Rep. Ann Hraychuck, 28th Assembly District

The new Wisconsin G.I. Bill that was signed into law last year is under attack. The Joint Finance Committee (JFC), the Senate, and the Assembly have made several revisions to the Governor's 2007-09 Budget (SB-40) which include the slashing of veterans benefits. I am wholeheartedly disappointed with the amendments made to the Wisconsin G.I. Bill, and I vow to fight for the return of these benefits.

Wisconsin is one of the leading veteran states in the nation because of these benefits. As passed last spring, the WI G.I. Bill waives tuition for eligible veterans and their dependents for up to 8 full-time semesters or 128 credits at any school in the University of Wisconsin System or Wisconsin Technical College System. There is no time limit on the use or completion of this service. Dependents of the veteran who qualify as well for this benefit under the bill are spouses, an un-remarried surviving spouse, or a child between the ages of 18-25. Also, if a veteran is disabled (30 percent or greater) the dependents can be eligible to receive a remission of tuition.

Although this highly beneficial program has only been around for a short time, the Joint Finance Committee, the Senate, and the Assembly have gone to great lengths to strip it down to pinch pennies. Now veterans must complete their degree within 10 years of returning from active duty, and they can only get an undergraduate degree if they do not already have one. Not only that but they also aimed to restrict graduate study by lowering the amount of graduate credits eligible for a tuition waiver and eliminating graduate study for a veteran who already received an undergraduate degree under the program. There are many scenarios in which a soldier left their career to go and serve their country, and then post-duty needed to change careers which could demand a different degree.

This is an issue that is especially important to me and hits very close to home. I have had several family members serve in the military including my dad, my brother, and my husband. I find it crucial that we protect and take care of the men and women who have dedicated their lives to serving our nation.

To my dismay, my colleagues on both sides of the aisle are trying to cut corners and save money wherever they can. I was hoping that the Assembly would restore these benefits in their version of the budget; however this was not the case. We must now focus our attention on the Conference Committee which will try to create a budget that both the Assembly and the Senate can compromise on. I will not stop fighting for veterans. I'm grateful to live in a nation where men and women are willing to give their lives in the name of freedom and I think it is just plain wrong that we are attempting to balance the budget on the backs of veterans.

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