

Easing the Path to College

BY MICHELLE CAMACHO LIU

Veterans 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.

Michelle Camacho Liu tracks post-secondary issues for NCSL.

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

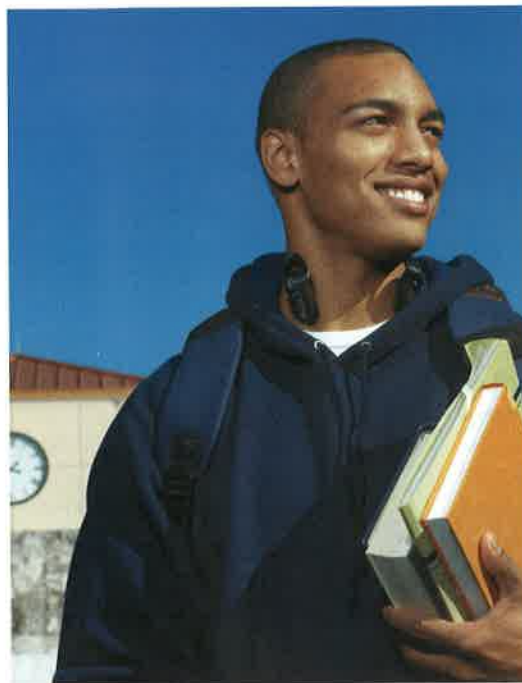


Representative Ty Cullen Hawaii (D)

of those who have 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.”



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—Representative Ty Cullen (D), Hawaii

Veterans' Health Benefits Can Benefit States

Washington state is saving millions of dollars by steering low-income veterans, active duty service members and their families away from Medicaid and into veteran and military health care programs, which, unlike Medicaid, are funded entirely by the federal government. Often it's just a matter of educating them on these benefits.

The state's Veterans Benefit Enhancement Program uses federal data from PARIS (Public Assistance Reporting Information System) to identify Medicaid beneficiaries (especially veterans receiving costly long-term care) who may qualify for various VA and military health coverage benefits, including long-term care and prescription drugs. Once the veterans and their families are identified, they are referred to the Washington Department of Veteran Affairs, a partner in the program, to get connected with appropriate health services.

In 2011, the state saved \$5.7 million in Medicaid costs, and a total of \$21 million since the start of the program in 2003.

"Average active duty salaries for new soldiers are low enough that their children and families can qualify for Medicaid or CHIP, especially in Washington where our eligibility level for kids is 300 percent above the federal poverty guidelines," says Bill Allman, project analyst for the program. Twenty-seven states have eligibility levels over 200 percent of poverty for children.

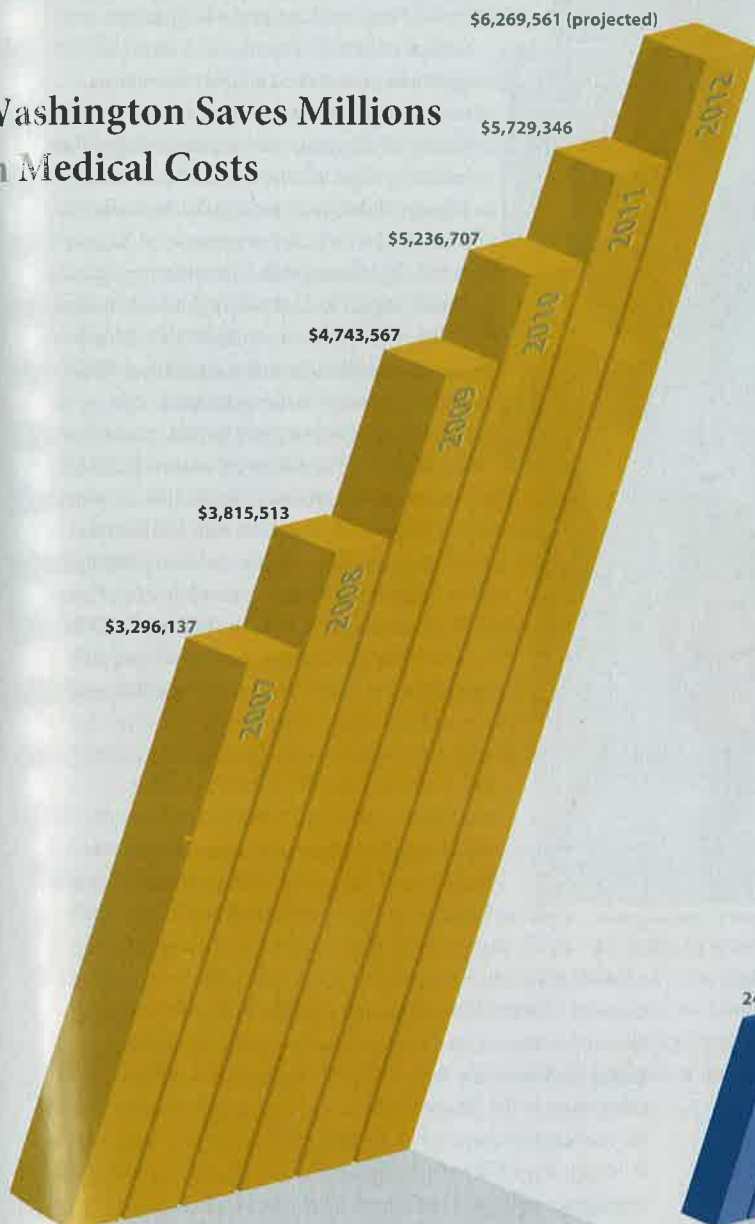
Currently, at least four other states—California, Connecticut, Kansas and Texas—are in the process of establishing similar programs.

—Erica Chavez and Laura Tobler

What is PARIS?

- ◆ The Public Assistance Reporting Information System is a federal database on recipients of public assistance.
- ◆ It allows states to share information across statelines.
- ◆ States have been required to contribute data to PARIS since 2009.
- ◆ Using Social Security numbers, states can track if Medicaid beneficiaries are receiving duplicate services in other states or other federal benefits.

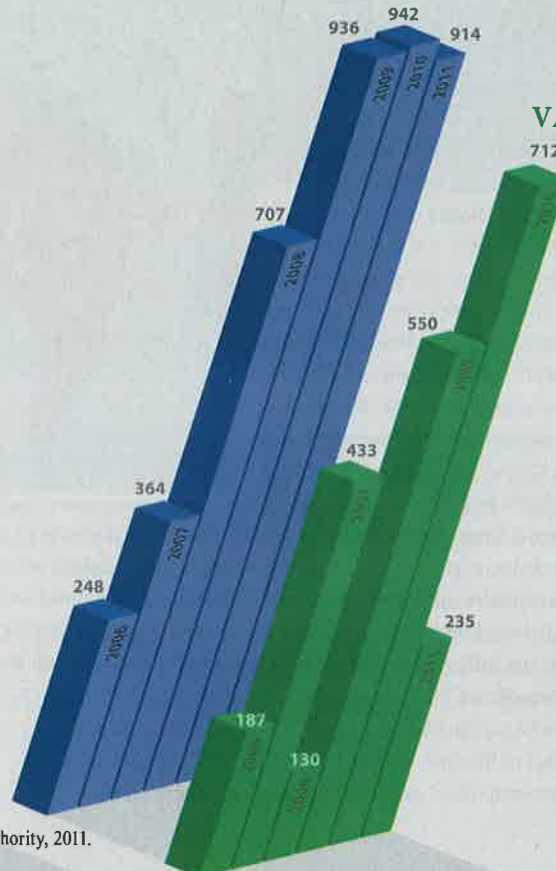
Washington Saves Millions in Medical Costs



The Number of Veterans Directed to VA Health, TRICARE or CHAMPVA

TRICARE covers military retirees, active duty military personnel and Department of Defense civilian employees. CHAMPVA covers dependants of military personnel who are totally and permanently disabled, or were killed in action.

TRICARE or CHAMPVA



CORRECTION:

A map published on page 5 in the March issue of State Legislatures contained incorrect minimum wages for eight states. The correct figures are: Arizona, \$7.65; Colorado, \$7.64; Florida, \$7.67; Montana, \$7.65; Ohio, \$7.70; Oregon, \$8.80; Vermont, \$8.46; and Washington, \$9.04.

Sources: Veteran's Benefit Enhance Program and Washington State Health Care Authority, 2011.