

New Look for G.I. Bill

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By Eric Poole

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And Teolis, a former mayor of Ellwood City, said he wasn't alone.

"There were men who spent four years in the army and went to college while they worked for U.S. Steel," he said. "They wouldn't have been able to go to college otherwise."

The original G.I. Bill, passed in 1944, brought college - previously the near-exclusive domain of the well-to-do - and relative affluence within the reach of former servicemen and women whose families had struggled through the Great Depression only a decade earlier.

U.S. Rep. Jason Altmire, D-4, McCandless Township, stopped in Ellwood City with Teolis, and Tod Conner, of the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Butler, to highlight the benefits of a new G.I. Bill.

"There's nothing more important than addressing the needs of our veterans," Altmire said.

The original G.I. Bill's benefits aren't keeping up with spiraling higher education costs, said Tod Conner, Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom outreach coordinator at the Butler VA hospital.

Conner, a Marine Corps veteran of the first Gulf War, said he is seeing newly-returned veterans facing problems paying for college, even with today's G.I. Bill benefits.

Under an updated G.I. Bill, that would change. The updated bill, passed by the U.S. House and Senate, would provide educational benefits of up to \$23,846 a year for tuition, books and a monthly stipend for living expenses.

Conner said that amount would cover the tuition and costs to attend the colleges in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education system, including Slippery Rock University.

"Looking at the numbers, it's basically a scholarship," he said. "A lot of the boys and girls are coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan with stress disorders and this is one stress we can take off of them."

The tuition benefit, which is attached to a larger bill, is now in conference committee to iron out differences between the proposed laws passed in the House and Senate. Altmire said President George W. Bush has promised to veto the updated G.I. Bill because of cost considerations.

If the president follows through on his veto pledge, Altmire said Congress will attempt to pass the bill over his objection.

"The president feels like this is too expensive," Altmire said. "I can't think of anything more important we could be doing than providing an education for our veterans."

Establishing the expanded tuition benefit would cost \$50 billion over 10 years, according to Altmire. He said Congress would look into ways to make up that funding.

Teolis, a beneficiary of the original G.I. Bill, said that law paid for itself by enabling returning World War II veterans to work in professional occupations and earn more money - and pay more income tax - than they would have without a college education.

"The government actually got its money back," he said.