

## **Coronavirus and VA**

How will the coronavirus impact students receiving benefits from the GI Bill? First, I do not speak for the VA, however this is what I've found from the VA's news releases and website. I can see two different issues. First, what happens if the college closes due to coronavirus concerns. Second, what happens if the college stops in-class courses and goes to on-line courses only? Congress recently passed S3503 and it was signed by the president on 21 March that helps answer these questions. The second question is easier to answer. The law enables the VA to continue providing the same level of education benefits to students having to take their courses on-line. Students will continue to receive the same monthly benefits until the college returns to in-class course or 21 December whichever occurs first. The law gives the VA temporary authority to continue payments uninterrupted in the case of a national emergency. Under the normal GI Bill rules, on-line courses are treated differently than in-class course. Students are not required to take any action, benefits will continue automatically. I could not find the answer to what happens if a college only moves some of the courses to on-line and because of this the student workload goes below the full-time minimum.

What happens if a college closes and does not offer classes on-line due to the coronavirus? In this case, the VA will continue to pay benefits through the end of the term or up to four weeks from the date of closure, whichever is earlier. After that, legislative action must take place to authorize continuation of benefit payments. Concerned students should contact their college certifying official with questions.

What should you do if you have an upcoming appointment with the VA hospital? As with other hospitals, the VA hospitals are experiencing a heavy demand for information and services. There may be long 'on-hold' times when calling the VA hospital. Again, as I've written about in the past, the on-line access to the VA is the best route to communicate. It works very well, I use it for most of my communication with the VA. If you have an upcoming elective appointment with the VA, you may want to ask if the VA would like to postpone it. Postponing elective appointments will give the VA personnel time to address the usual number of critical appointments and be able to respond to the coronavirus more effectively. If a Veteran has symptoms such as fever, cough or shortness of breath he or she should immediately contact their local VA facility. Please call or use on-line options to request an appointment. Upon arriving at the VA, all patients will be screened for flu-like symptoms before they enter in order to protect other patients and staff. A VA health care professional will assist you with next steps once this screening process is complete.