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April 11, 2013

3/29/2013

DOD reversing sequestration cuts

Military tuition assistance funds to be reinstated

Rachel Trott
staff writer

Alternative funding options

Some military service members were sent scrambling earlier this month when the Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard and Army announced suspensions of the Tuition Assistance program to make up for budget cuts after the federal government's sequestration.

The Tuition Assistance program provided \$4,500 per year per service member to take classes or pursue a degree. Roughly 300,000 service members nationwide used the program last year.

Currently, the Department of Defense is in the process of reinstating full funding for Tuition Assistance after Congress voted last week to bar the armed services from cuts to the program.

The Luke Air Force Base Education Center has developed a one-hour briefing on finding alternative funding sources. It is limited to active-duty service members only.

The briefings are at 9 a.m. April 9 and May 7 and 2 p.m. April 25 in Room 3148 of Bldg. 1150.

For information or to make a reservation, call 623-856-7723.

Rio Salado students can get information on the Tuition Assistance program and alternative funding options by calling 480-377-4010.

EMCC students can get information from the Office of Veterans Services by calling 623-935-8937.

How quickly the program will begin honoring new claims from service members for classes is unclear, however.

Local impact

The suspension was felt by some local service members using the program to attend school.

Several colleges hold classes and run offices on Luke Air Force Base for service members to use for their education. One college is Maricopa Community College's Rio Salado.

"An email came out on the evening of March 11 that [the Air Force] was suspending the Tuition Assistance program. We were in the process of enrolling students because we had a class beginning on March 25, so each student who wasn't already approved for tuition assistance couldn't apply after March 11," explained Michael Pattarozzi, the college's associate dean for Instruction and Community Development.

Pattarozzi added that from his conversations with the college's coordinators on base, some airmen are concerned with the long-term impact that missing classes because of the suspended funding might have on their education.

"If you're a mechanic doing a job, and you lose one of the tools in your toolbox, it impacts your ability to perform that task," he said. "In this particular task, these students are planning their education and looking at tuition assistance as a method to pay for their education. It affects their planning."

Support for service members

Rio Salado and nearby Estrella Mountain Community College in Avondale are offering alternatives

for students to fund their education while the Tuition Assistance program is in the process of potentially being reinstated.

Some students may choose to pay for classes out of pocket, while others may look into grants, scholarships or loans.

"There's always options. [EMCC's Office of Veterans Services] is always a place to bang around ideas as a support service. We're always gathering resources and directing people to other offices, it's just something that needs to be looked creatively at," Veterans Services Director Nancy McNeill said.

Before the suspension, EMCC had approximately 50 students using Tuition Assistance program funds, McNeill said.

In the weeks since the original program suspension, several veteran's organizations such as the Student Veterans of America, the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion, have been outspokenly questioning the fairness of taking away the program from service members.

McNeill echoed some of her own concerns about the decision. She served four years in the Air Force on the flight line in avionics.

"I'm definitely more on the side of the veteran more than the average person, but it's almost like a contract was signed, and the government defaulted on their part of the contract," she said. "We have an entire volunteer force protecting us all over the world, and one of the benefits of joining is education."

McNeill added she is optimistic about Tuition Assistance funds being made available again.

"I'm optimistic because I want to believe that the right thing will be done," she said. "We have to continue to be strong with our military and bring in quality people, and a well-educated military is a better military, so really everybody wins in that scenario. It's just the right thing to do."

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