

Out-of-state vets may get in-state tuition

Written by Danae Lenz
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LINCOLN--Out-of-state veterans who were honorably discharged may soon be able to pay in-state tuition. The bill, LB 740, passed unanimously in the Education Committee with one member absent and has already advanced to the second stage of floor consideration.

The bill's sponsor, Bellevue Sen. Sue Crawford, has made it her priority bill, and says now is the time to act, partially because of the estimated million military members expected to be discharged as foreign military engagements wind down. She also said it is necessary because it would add quality to Nebraska and would allow universities to grow even more.

"It is a great benefit to recruit and retain veterans to improve our population," Crawford said Monday. "But at the same time, it meets important educational goals of our state and important workforce goals in our state."

Though Nebraska maintains its low unemployment rate (3.6 percent compared with the national average of 6.7 percent as of December), employers are struggling to find workers who are qualified for the jobs, so this bill would help remedy that as well, Crawford said.

Currently, the federal Post-9/11 GI Bill only covers the cost of in-state tuition for veterans. So if a veteran is from another state, he or she must pay the additional cost out of pocket. If this bill is passed, the in-state tuition would continue to be covered by the government.

The Legislature's fiscal analysts estimated the bill would cost the University of Nebraska about \$500,000 in lost, out-of-state tuition revenue.

Under Crawford's bill, veterans must enroll within two years of their discharge date. They must also either register to vote, get a driver's license or register a vehicle in Nebraska. The bill also applies to veteran's spouses and dependents so long as they, too, apply before the two years is up. Current students would also be eligible.

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Michelle Waite, assistant to the chancellor for community relations at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, has worked closely with Crawford to get the bill passed. She said it was a win-win for all parties involved: the universities, the state and the veterans.

“We want these students to be residents of the state of Nebraska, be taxpaying citizens, frankly,” Waite said on Thursday. “It’s in the state’s best interest to not allow these individuals to come just for purposes of education. We want them to stay here. We want them to move here. We want the business. Hopefully they’ll bring their families here. This is all very positive stuff.”

Waite said veterans bring a unique voice to the table. In the Jan. 21 hearing for the bill, Waite testified on behalf of the University of Nebraska system.

“We realize that our veteran students enrich our campuses by providing a very different perspective based on their military experience even though many student veterans may be the same age as undergraduates that haven’t served their country,” Waite said in the hearing. She added later that NU seeks to make “the college experience embracing and meaningful for veterans.”

The bill would bring an extra cost to universities that would forgo the higher out-of-state tuition payments, but Waite said that cost could be offset by increased enrollment. And she emphasized that the cost isn’t what’s important when considering this bill.

“It’s the right thing to do for these young men and women that have served our country,” she said.

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