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NKU prepares for influx of vets

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HIGHLAND HEIGHTS - Northern Kentucky University is preparing for a wave of military veterans.

Benefits from the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act signed by President Bush in June 2008 become available Aug. 1.

"Northern Kentucky University has over 300 students currently receiving veteran's educational benefits," said Dave Merriss, director of the NKU One-Stop Phone Center and a retired Army lieutenant colonel with almost 28 years of active service.

"With the passing of the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill, the Veterans Administration has projected a 20 percent to 25 percent increase in the total number of participants in VA education programs."

To help these veterans ease into campus life, NKU has created a Veterans Support Committee to ensure the university is prepared to meet the needs of the veterans.

"Enthusiasm for the committee has been great," said Merriss. "So far 27 faculty and staff have volunteered to participate on the committee...We hope the committee will provide a collaborative platform from which we can work to increase campus awareness of issues faced by veterans, develop programs and activities that promote access and success for veterans and family members on campus, partner with other organizations that can help veterans and engage the community in this process."

A large part of the committee's work will be outreach to student veterans to make sure they are getting the benefits they earned through their service.

Only active duty service performed after Sept. 10, 2001 may be considered for determining eligibility of this new benefit, said Merriss. To be eligible, a service member or veteran must have served at least 90 aggregate days on active duty. However, individuals honorably discharged for a service-connected disability who served 30 continuous days after Sept. 10, 2001 may also establish eligibility.

Merriss compared the new benefits to the post-World War II GI Bill.

"Both my mother and father served in the military in WW II," he said. "I can remember them saying when they came home it was difficult to find work. Going to school and getting an education using the WW II G.I. Bill filled that void. Obtaining additional education allowed many veterans to come out as professionals and contribute to the community in many different ways."

"For the first time since WW II, the Post 9/11 GI Bill offers that same hope and opportunity."

Merriss said the new benefits will cover much of the cost of attending NKU.

"A veteran meeting all eligibility criteria and approved by the Veterans Administration for the Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits attending Northern Kentucky University can expect to have his or her fall and spring tuition paid, receive a monthly housing allowance estimated at \$1263.00 and receive a yearly book stipend of \$1,000," he said.