

MilitaryTimes

Bill aims to update, grow Troops to Teachers

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The Troops to Teachers program would be rejuvenated to attract younger veterans to work as public school teachers under a bipartisan plan announced Tuesday.

The existing program, created in 1994 to help find post-service work for people whose military careers were being cut short by the post-Cold War drawdown, has been limited to career service members with at least six years of active service or 10 years of reserve service.

The Post-9/11 Troops to Teachers Enhancement Act would reduce the requirement so that anyone who has served at least 90 days of continuous active duty since Sept. 11, 2001, could be eligible to participate in the program. Those who have not served 90 days of active service since Sept. 11, 2001, would be eligible if they served four years on active duty, two fewer than current requirements.

The program expansion is sponsored by Sens. Michael Bennet, D-Colo., and John McCain, R-Ariz., and Reps. Joe Courtney, D-Conn., Doris Matsui, D-Calif. and Thomas Petri, R-Wis.

Separate but identical bills were introduced Tuesday in the House, HR 3942, and Senate, S 1932.

Courtney said the change is much like the Post-9/11 GI Bill, which took an old program and updated it for a new generation of veterans. "We are taking a program that is out of date and modernizing it," he said.

The existing Troops to Teachers program has seen about 10,000 people, most but not all of them former officers, find jobs in public schools, Courtney said.

"It has been a very successful program, but it has not been as successful as it can be," said McCain.

Reduced length-of-service requirements would not change other rules. A service member or veteran still must have at least a bachelor's degree to participate in the program.

Financial incentives include a \$5,000 stipend to pay for teacher certification costs for those who agree to teach in a school in which at least 20 percent of the students come from families living below the poverty line, or a \$10,000 bonus for those who agree to teach in schools where at least 50 percent of the students come from families living below the poverty line.

The new bill proposes to expand availability of the \$5,000 stipend by paying it to those who agree to teach three years in any public school district receiving federal funding to help disadvantaged students. Supporters said only about seven states qualify for stipends today, which means service members and veterans cannot always find schools that have openings near where they live or want to live.

The new bill would not make any changes to the \$10,000 bonus program.

Bennet said that changes would result in a 49 percent increase in the number of schools in which someone could teach under the program.

In addition to the eligibility changes, the bill authorizes — subject to appropriation — \$50 million annually for five years to pay for incentives, a significant boost over the \$15 million a year being spent today.

One problem with the current Troops to Teachers program is that appropriations — actual funding provided by Congress — has been limited.

Courtney acknowledged that the new legislation would not make that problem magically disappear; the revamped Troops to Teachers initiative still would have to compete for money with other Department of Education programs.