

Education is focus of Office of Veterans Services

As our nation celebrated Independence Day and the freedom and opportunities that are unequalled in the world, we keep in mind the service members who protect us and preserve our freedom.

Congress passed the Post-9/11 Veterans Education Assistance Act of 2008, which will restore the promise of a full, four-year college education for the veterans and service members of Iraq and Afghanistan. I was pleased to represent Erie County as Rep. Brian Higgins applauded the authorization of an expanded GI Bill, to provide our brave men and women veterans with a first-rate college education.

It is a win-win for America and Erie County to welcome home our newest generation of veterans and to provide them with the opportunity to continue their education. Our community and our economy will benefit from their energy, character and bravery. Erie County's Office of Veterans Services serves the 110,000 veterans living in Erie County and will work diligently to make sure our local veterans know what benefits —

new and existing — are available to them.

The GI Bill of 1944 made a free college education available to more than 16 million veterans after World War II. According to a congressional study, for every \$1 spent, the original GI bill returned \$7 to the national economy in terms of productivity, consumer spending and tax revenue. The GI Bill for the 21st century will provide the greatest increase in education benefits to those who serve our country since World War II. Those who have served for three years or more would qualify for the full educational benefit, which includes payments covering 100 percent of tuition and fees at in-state public schools, as well as monthly stipends equivalent to housing costs in the area.

The government will match contributions from institutions whose tuition is more expensive than the maximum assistance provided under this legis-



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lation. Veterans may also receive additional assistance for tutoring, as well as certification exams.

The law will be implemented in two phases, with the first phase beginning this fall and full implementation in place by August 2009. Erie County's Director of Veterans Services, Patrick Welch, is taking action today and is working with local colleges and universities to provide our newest generation of veterans with increased educational opportunities.

Erie County's Office of Veterans Services encourages all veterans to contact their office to discuss educational assistance

that is available right now. There are some colleges in WNY that will provide significant tuition benefits to returning military personnel beginning in August 2008, and the new New York State Tuition Assistance Program will provide additional funds. Contact Welch at 858-6363 or patrick.welch@erie.gov.