

Virginia Military Survivors and Dependents Education Program

Frequently Asked Questions 2009-2010

The Virginia Military Survivors and Dependents Education Program (VMSDEP) is a Commonwealth of Virginia program which provides education benefits to spouses and children of military service members killed, missing in action, taken prisoner, or who became at least 90 percent disabled as a result of military service in an armed conflict. Military service includes service in the United States Armed Forces, United States Armed Forces Reserves, the Virginia National Guard, or the Virginia National Guard Reserves. Armed conflict includes military operations against terrorism or as the result of a terrorist act, a peace-keeping mission, or any armed conflict after December 6, 1941. The purpose of the Virginia Military Survivors and Dependents Education Program is to provide undergraduate or other postsecondary education free of tuition and all required fees. A stipend to offset the cost of room, board, books, and supplies may also be available, contingent on funding. Benefits are available for up to four years.

What benefits are available under the Virginia Military Survivors and Dependents Education Program (VMSDEP)?

- Waiver of tuition and all required fees at any public institution of higher education or other public accredited postsecondary institution granting a degree, diploma, or certificate in the Commonwealth of Virginia.
- Stipend to offset the costs of room, board, books, and supplies (amount of stipend is dependent on funding) for students attending any public institution of higher education or other public accredited postsecondary institution granting a degree, diploma, or certificate in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

How do I access my VMSDEP benefits?

To access your VMSDEP benefits, follow these steps:

1. Apply to, and be accepted by, a public institution of higher education or other public accredited postsecondary institution granting a degree, diploma, or certificate in the Commonwealth of Virginia.
2. Request a Letter of Eligibility from the Virginia Department of Veterans Services by completing the VMSDEP Application found on the Department of Veterans Services website at www.dvs.virginia.gov.
3. Present your VMSDEP Letter of Eligibility to your school's financial aid office. The Virginia Department of Veterans Services will mail a copy of the VMSDEP Letter of Eligibility to your school's financial aid office, but it is your responsibility to work with the financial aid office to ensure that the benefits are correctly applied.

How do I request a Letter of Eligibility?

Complete the VMSDEP application, found on the Virginia Department of Veterans Services website at www.VirginiaforVeterans.com. Print, sign, fax or mail the application to the address shown on the application.

When will I be notified if I am eligible for VMSDEP benefits?

Our goal is to make all eligibility determinations within 30 days of receipt of your application. It is important that you apply early so that the Virginia Department of Veterans Services will have time to review your application, and, if you are eligible, issue your Letter of Eligibility in time for you to use your VMSDEP benefits.

Do I need to apply just once or for each year I will attend?

You only need to apply once. When you have been approved, the school will be notified of your available benefits for the 36 months (four years) under this program. No further request by the student is necessary. The school will provide the available benefits unless you transfer to another school or there is a change in the semesters you attend; in which case, you must notify the Virginia Department of Veterans Services should these changes occur. This will ensure that your benefits have been applied appropriately and you are able to take advantage of your VMSDEP benefits for the full four years of eligibility, especially if there is a break in your education.

When is the VMSDEP application due?

VMSDEP applications are accepted year round. However, you should submit your VMSDEP application at least 30 days prior to the start of the term (semester) in order to ensure that your Letter of Eligibility is issued in a timely manner.

How does the waiver of tuition and required fees work?

You are eligible for up to four years (36 months) of VMSDEP benefits. This means your school will waive your tuition and required fees for up to four years. This also applies if you attend one school for part of the four years and another school for the remainder. Present your VMSDEP Letter of Eligibility to your school's financial aid office to ensure the tuition and fee waiver is applied to your student account.

What is the stipend for room, board, books, and supplies?

The 2007 General Assembly created the Virginia Military Survivors and Dependents Education Fund (VMSDEF). The sole purpose of the VMSDEF is to provide financial assistance for board and room charges, books and supplies, and other expenses at any public institution of higher education or other public accredited postsecondary institution granting a degree, diploma, or certificate in the Commonwealth of Virginia for the use and benefit of qualified survivors and dependents.

How does the stipend work?

Each year, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) and its member institutions determine the amount and the manner in which financial assistance will be made available to beneficiaries. For the 2009-2010 school year, each eligible student may receive a

stipend of up to \$1,500 to offset the costs of room, board, books, and supplies. You must work with your school's financial aid office to determine the exact amount of your stipend.

A stipend of up to \$1,500 is available. What does that mean?

The amount of the stipend depends on these factors:

- The per-student amount set by the General Assembly: For the 2009-2010 school year, the stipend amount is up to \$1,500 per student.
- The total amount appropriated by the General Assembly for the Virginia Military Survivors and Dependents Education Fund:
 - For the 2009-2010 school year, \$1 million was appropriated. This is enough to provide up to a \$1,500 stipend to approximately 667 students.
 - However, if more than 667 students qualify for the stipend, the amount awarded to individual students will be reduced in order to ensure the maximum number of students receive at least some benefits.
 - For the 2009-2010 school year, 740 students are expected to qualify for the stipend. Because there is a finite amount of funding (i.e. \$1 million) available, the maximum stipend for the 2009-2010 school year will be \$1,350.
- Enrollment status: The amount you will receive depends on whether you are enrolled full-time, half-time, etc. For the 2009-2010 school year:
 - Students who are enrolled full-time will receive \$675 per semester.
 - Students who are enrolled at least half-time but less than full-time will receive \$450 per semester.
 - Students who are enrolled less than half-time will receive \$225 per semester.
- Other forms of scholarships, grants, or waivers you are receiving: The maximum amount to be expended for each such survivor or dependent cannot exceed, when combined with any other form of scholarship, grant, or waiver, the actual costs related to the survivor's or dependent's educational expenses. If you are receiving another form of scholarship, grant, or waiver, it may reduce the amount of VMSDEP stipend you receive.

How do you define full-time, half-time, etc.?

For the 2009-2010 school year, enrollment levels are defined as:

- Undergraduate full-time = 12 credit hours or more per term
- Undergraduate at least half time = 6-11 credit hours per term
- Undergraduate less than half-time = less than 6 credit hours per term
- Graduate full-time = 9 credit hours or more per term
- Graduate at least half time = 6-8 credit hours per term
- Graduate less than half-time = less than 6 credit hours per term

What does “the maximum amount to be expended for each such survivor or dependent cannot exceed, when combined with any other form of scholarship, grant, or waiver, the actual costs related to the survivor's or dependent's educational expenses” really mean?

It means that the amount of your stipend could be reduced if you are receiving a scholarship, grant, or waiver for room, board, books, and supplies. When you visit your school's financial aid office, they will tell you your school's “cost of attendance,” which is the average cost of tuition, required fees, room, board, books, and supplies for your institution. This could be anywhere from a few hundred dollars to \$20,000 or more per year. Under VMSDEP, your

school will waive your tuition and required fees. This leaves the costs of room, board, books, and supplies. Your financial aid office will compare those costs to any form of scholarship, grant, or waiver you may receive. For example, if you have an athletic scholarship or are receiving Chapter 35 benefits, the amount of your VMSDEP stipend could be reduced.

How is the amount of my stipend determined?

Taking into account the factors discussed above, your school's financial aid office will determine the expected amount of your stipend in this manner:

- Institution cost of attendance minus "scholarships, grants, and waivers" equals VMSDEP stipend (up to \$1,350)
- Example: If you are enrolled full-time for both fall and spring semesters and you've received a grant from the Jones Foundation for \$6,000, and your institution's cost of attendance is \$8,000, then the amount of your VMSDEP stipend would be determined like this:
 - Cost of attendance (\$8,000) minus your grant (\$6,000) equals \$2,000. However, the maximum amount of the VMSDEP stipend is \$1,350. This is the amount you would receive.
- Example: If you are enrolled full-time for both fall and spring semesters and you expect to receive \$5,000 in Chapter 35 benefits and your institution's cost of attendance is \$6,000, then the amount of your VMSDEP stipend would be determined like this:
 - Cost of attendance (\$6,000) minus your expected Chapter 35 benefits (\$5,000) equals \$1,000. Because the amount of the VMSDEP stipend cannot exceed the actual cost of attendance, your VMSDEP stipend would be \$1,000.

When will I receive my stipend?

Approximately four to six weeks after the start of the term. The process works like this:

- The Department of Veterans Services provides the names of students who have been authorized for program benefits to the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia. At the end of the term's drop/add date, SCHEV will work with the colleges and universities to 1) verify the number of VMSDEP students enrolled for that term, and 2) determine the final award amount for each student. The per-student award is based on:
 - The total number of students enrolled
 - The total amount of money available in the Virginia Military Survivors and Dependents Education Fund
 - The per student limit set by the General Assembly
 - Your enrollment status (full-time, half-time, etc.)
 - Any other forms of scholarships, grants, or waivers you are receiving
- SCHEV will then disburse funds to the colleges and universities.
- Your school will apply the stipend to your student account.
- If you are due a refund, your school will issue you a refund in accordance with your institution's refund policy.

Will I receive the stipend in cash?

Not necessarily. If you qualify, your stipend will either be applied to your student account or will be refunded to you in accordance with your institution's refund policy.

- Example: You live in the dorms and you've signed up for the meal plan. The cost is \$1,000 a semester for each. You are a full-time student and will receive \$675 per semester. Your student account would show a charge of \$2,000 for the room and board. This would be reduced by \$675 – the amount of your stipend. Your student account would still have a balance of \$1,325 for the semester.
- Example: You live off campus and don't participate in the meal plan. You are enrolled half-time, so your stipend is \$450 per semester. Your student account wouldn't show any charges, since you don't live on campus and aren't on the meal plan. You would receive a refund of \$450 in accordance with your school's refund policy.

Can I use the stipend to buy my books and supplies?

Yes. However, the stipend won't be applied to your student account until approximately four weeks after the start of the term, and any refund you are due will not reach you until after that time. If you need your books and supplies earlier, we suggest you use other funds to purchase them, and then use your stipend to defray other costs.

For the purpose of awarding the stipend, how is the academic year defined?

In general, an academic year consists of the fall, spring, and summer terms. The first stipend award for an academic year will be for the fall term, and will be generally be equal to half the annual award for each student. The other half of the annual stipend will be awarded in the spring term.

Is the stipend ever awarded for the summer term?

Yes. A stipend can be awarded for the summer term if you did not use the full annual award in the fall or spring terms. Contact your school's financial aid office for more details about a stipend for the summer term. The summer stipend is contingent on funds remaining in the Virginia Military Survivors and Dependents Education Fund.

What are the requirements for this program?

To be eligible, children and spouses of qualifying military service members must meet the following requirements:

- The child must be between ages 16 and 29; there are no age restrictions for spouses.
- The military service member must have been a bona fide domiciliary of Virginia at the time he or she entered active duty or must have been a bona fide domiciliary of Virginia for at least five years immediately prior to the date of the application for admission.
- In the case of a deceased military service member, the surviving spouse can meet the residency requirements if he or she lived in Virginia for at least five years prior to marrying the military service member or has been a bona fide domiciliary of Virginia for at least five years immediately prior to the date of application.

Is the surviving spouse of a qualifying military service member eligible to attend school under this program?

Yes, as long as all eligibility requirements are met.

May I use my VMSDEP benefits to attend a private school?

No. You may use your VMSDEP benefits only at state-supported schools in Virginia. However, if you attend a private school, you may be entitled to receive federal educational assistance under the Dependents' Educational Assistance Program (Chapter 35 of Title 38 of the U.S. Code). Visit the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs website at www.va.gov to learn more.

May I use my VMSDEP benefits to attend a state-supported institution in another state?

No. You may use your VMSDEP benefits to attend only state-supported schools in Virginia. You may not use them to attend a school in another state.

If I am entitled to benefits under VMSDEP, am I guaranteed admission to a state-supported college or university?

No. Eligibility for VMSDEP benefits does not guarantee you admission to a state-supported college or university. Your admission is based on the school's admission requirements and your academic credentials.

May I attend two state-supported colleges or universities concurrently?

Yes. You may attend two state-supported schools concurrently, as long as you meet the admission and attendance requirements of each institution.

May I take online classes?

Yes. You may take online classes as long as those classes are offered through a public institution of higher education or other public accredited postsecondary institution granting a degree, diploma, or certificate in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Does the four-year entitlement mean that my tuition and fees will be waived for an entire four years of college?

Your tuition and all required fees will be waived for up to four years. Your benefits expire after four years whether or not you have completed your degree program.

May I use my VMSDEP benefits for remedial or refresher education?

Yes, as long as the remedial or refresher education is at a public institution of higher education or other public accredited postsecondary institution granting a degree, diploma, or certificate in the Commonwealth of Virginia. However, each month of preparatory education will be charged against your four-year entitlement.

May I use part of my four years of entitlement to earn a masters or professional degree?

Yes. VMSDEP benefits may be used at any public institution of higher education or other public accredited postsecondary institution granting a degree, diploma, or certificate in the Commonwealth of Virginia. This includes graduate school, law school, etc.

May I use my VMSDEP benefits after I reach age 30?

If you are a spouse of a qualifying military service member, there are no age restrictions on when you may use your VMSDEP benefits. If you are the child of a qualifying military service member, you must use your benefits between 16 and 29 years of age, inclusive. However, the Commissioner of the Virginia Department of Veterans Services may approve the use of

VMSDEP benefits for dependent children older than 29, but only if extenuating circumstances prevented the use of VMSDEP benefits before the age of 30.

How do I get a waiver to use my benefits past the age of 29?

You must send a letter to the Commissioner of the Virginia Department of Veterans Services requesting the waiver. Your letter should clearly state why you were not able to use your benefits before you turned age 30. Be sure to attach any supporting documentation. Approval is not automatic; there must be extenuating circumstances that prevented you from using your VMSDEP benefits before age 30.

If I get married while attending school, do I lose my entitlement to VMSDEP benefits?

No. An eligible student's marital status has no effect on his or her entitlement to VMSDEP benefits.

If I have to interrupt my education for some reason, can my VMSDEP benefits be reinstated at a later date?

Yes. To reinstate your benefits:

1. You must request in writing that you wish to be reinstated.
2. You must continue to meet all eligibility requirements.

Are there attendance or academic requirements that must be met to continue my eligibility under VMSDEP?

Yes. Your attendance and academic progress must be acceptable within the guidelines established by the school you are attending. If you are suspended from school for any reason, your benefits will be terminated from VMSDEP.

If I do not successfully complete one of my courses, may I repeat it without charge?

Yes. Tuition and required fees will be waived; however, your entitlement to benefits under VMSDEP will be reduced for each month you are in school whether you pass or fail a course. If you fail and repeat too many courses, you risk exhausting your VMSDEP entitlement before completing your education.

May I be reinstated in VMSDEP if I have been suspended from school?

If you are readmitted by the school that suspended you, your VMSDEP benefits will be reinstated. For your VMSDEP benefits to continue, your attendance and academic progress must be acceptable within the guidelines established by the school you are attending.

If I withdraw from school, will it affect my four years of entitlement to VMSDEP benefits?

If you voluntarily withdraw from school before the final withdrawal date, your attendance will not be counted against your entitlement. However, if you withdraw after the last date to withdraw without penalty, the entire semester will be deducted from your four years of entitlement.

How is VMSDEP different from the Dependents' Educational Assistance Program (Chapter 35)?

VMSDEP is a Commonwealth of Virginia program, and is administered by the Virginia Department of Veterans Services, a state agency. The Dependents' Educational Assistance Program (Chapter 35 of Title 38 of the U.S. Code) is a federal government program and is administered by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (the VA).

Can I use VMSDEP and Dependents' Educational Assistance Program (Chapter 35) benefits at the same time?

Yes. You may use your VMSDEP and Chapter 35 benefits at the same time. However, please note that the eligibility periods for the two programs are different. Depending on your circumstances, you may decide to use each program's benefits concurrently or separately.

If I have other questions about my benefits under VMSDEP, who can I talk to?

Feel free to call or write the Virginia Department of Veterans Services. We are here to help and will be happy to provide you with information or assistance. You can reach us at:

Virginia Department of Veterans Services
270 Franklin Road, S.W., Room 810
Roanoke, VA 24011
(540) 597-1730
Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m.—4:30 p.m.