



COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA JOINT LEADERSHIP COUNCIL OF VETERANS SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

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Position Paper 2019-05 Free Tuition for Virginia National Guardsmen

OBJECTIVE: To offer Virginia National Guardsmen free tuition at accredited Virginia colleges and universities, including community colleges, trade schools, and for-profit certification programs.

BACKGROUND:

- a. The Virginia National Guard (VNG) may miss end strength goals for the first time in more than a decade. National Guard leadership in Washington, D.C. made it clear that states who fail to meet strength goals will begin to lose force structure.
- b. VNG is losing recruits and current Virginia Guardsmen to surrounding states who offer free college tuition, including North Carolina, Tennessee, and Pennsylvania.
- c. Current VNG tuition assistance benefit comes with a 2-year service obligation and the benefit is only \$8,000 in state tuition assistance.

DISCUSSION:

- a. VNG has a significant presence and economic impact to Virginia, with facilities in over 40 communities valued at \$253M, and brings in more than \$250M in annual income, not including benefits.
- b. VNG maintains \$1.8B in equipment for state emergency response and federal training.
- c. Loss of force structure means loss of equipment, facilities, and personnel dollars to the Commonwealth, and lost opportunity to pursue increased force structure, which is a current priority for The Adjutant General.
- d. VNG is the tip of the spear with regard to cutting edge weapons systems and force structure, and are positioned to grow even more, but cannot do so without meeting end strength goals.
- e. The additional money spent on state tuition assistance comes back to Virginia through additional funds spent at Virginia's colleges, universities, and other continuing education courses, increased salaries (higher tax brackets), and most importantly not only skilled soldiers but skilled workers participating in Virginia's economy.
- f. Free tuition serves as a strong recruiting and retention incentive. Since Guardsmen are less transient than active duty, they are much more likely to go to school, work, live, shop, and enjoy leisure activities within the Commonwealth. Most settle permanently in Virginia.

RECOMMENDATION: That the Governor and General Assembly provide budget support of approximately a \$1 million increase in the annual State Tuition Assistance program for a pilot program to cover the estimated 3.5% of Guardsmen seeking a degree who are not currently completely covered by federal and state tuition assistance.