

February 16, 2021

Policy Advisory: Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship and Section 1001 of Public Law (P.L.) 116-315, Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M. D., Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020.

Background: On January 5, 2021, P.L. 116-315 was signed into law. Section 1001 of this law, entitled “Improvements to Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship (STEM Scholarship) program of Department of Veterans Affairs,” amends section 3320 of title 38, United States Code (U.S.C). Previously, only individuals enrolled in an approved STEM field while pursuing a standard, undergraduate college degree or a program of education leading to a teaching certification were eligible for the STEM scholarship. This section expands the eligibility for the STEM Scholarship to individuals enrolled in a dual degree program that includes a STEM undergraduate degree or certain individuals enrolled in a covered clinical training program for health care professionals. Section 1001 also authorizes VA to prioritize selection for the program when insufficient funds available in a fiscal year to provide additional benefits under this section to all eligible individuals. In addition, the statute removes the 48-month benefits limitation under 38 U.S.C. §3695 which limits an individual's aggregate period for receipt of education allowance or assistance.

Purpose/Discussion: The purpose of this advisory is to discuss the provisions in section 1001 of P.L. 116-315 and how the provisions impact the STEM Scholarship program.

Dual Degree Programs: Section 1001 of P.L. 116-315 expands the eligibility of the STEM Scholarship to individuals enrolled in a dual degree program that includes an undergraduate college degree, in an approved STEM degree field.

Clinical Training Programs: Section 1001 of PL 116-315 removes “a medical residency program” from the approved list of STEM degree programs. Medical residency programs are typically graduate level programs; therefore, although it was previously an approved program, individuals who otherwise may have been eligible for the STEM scholarship could not utilize the STEM program while enrolled in the medical residency program because the program did not meet the undergraduate requirement.

The statute now authorizes eligibility to the STEM Scholarship for an individual who has earned a standard, undergraduate college degree in an approved STEM degree field and is enrolled in a covered clinical training program for health care professionals. In addition, eligibility is expanded to an individual who has earned a graduate degree in an approved STEM degree field and is enrolled in a covered clinical training program for health care professionals.

Please see the following chart depicting STEM Scholarship eligibility as of January 5, 2021:

<u>Degree Types eligibility to STEM Scholarship</u>		
<i>*Chart assumes that all other requirements are met</i>		
1 st Degree Type	2 nd Degree/ Program Type	Eligibility for STEM Scholarship
Enrolled in a Standard, undergraduate degree in an approved STEM field	None	Yes
Enrolled in a Standard, undergraduate degree in a Non-STEM field	Enrolled in a Standard, undergraduate degree in an approved STEM field	Yes
Enrolled in a Standard, undergraduate degree in a Non-STEM field	Enrolled in a Graduate degree in an approved STEM field	No
Completed a Standard, undergraduate degree in an approved STEM field	Enrolled in a Covered clinical training program for health care professionals or a program of education leading to a teaching certification	Yes
Completed a Graduate degree in an approved STEM field	Enrolled in a Covered clinical training program for health care professionals	Yes
Enrolled in a Graduate degree in a Non-STEM field	None	No

Priority Criteria: Section 1001 of PL 116-315 amends the priority criteria for awarding the STEM scholarship. Prioritization is now only considered if VA is unable to fund all eligible individuals in the Fiscal Year. Please see below for order of priority, should the eligible individuals outweigh the available funds:

- 1) Individuals enrolled in an undergraduate STEM degree program (including an individual enrolled in a dual undergraduate STEM degree program),
- 2) Individuals enrolled in a program of education leading to a teaching certificate,
- 3) Individuals enrolled in a dual-degree program where the individual is pursuing both a STEM undergraduate degree and a STEM graduate degree,
- 4) Individuals who has earned an undergraduate degree and is enrolled in a covered clinical training program for health care professionals,
- 5) Individuals who has earned a graduate degree and is enrolled in a covered clinical training program for health care professionals,
- 6) All other eligible individuals

Under these new provisions, the priority criteria (under 38 U.S.C. § 3320(c)(2)) takes precedent over the largely unchanged criteria under 38 U.S.C. § 3320(c)(1), which states that “the Secretary may give priority” to STEM program eligible students who “require the most credit hours”.

What that means: In the event that VA is unable to fund every eligible STEM degree program student, VA prioritizes students as per under 38 U.S.C. § 3695(c)(2) and outlined above. Within that priority hierarchy, VA prioritizes those students who need the most credits.

As an example: VA has enough funds to fund all undergraduate STEM degrees, including dual undergraduate STEM degrees (priority 1), all teacher certificate programs (priority 2), all dual degree programs where the undergraduate and graduate degrees are both STEM (priority 3), but does not have enough funds to fund the rest of the STEM program eligible individuals. In this scenario, VA would prioritize individuals who have earned an undergraduate degree, are enrolled in a covered clinical training program for health care professionals (priority 4), and need the most credit hours.

Effective Date: This Policy Advisory applies to terms that begin on or after January 5, 2021.

Retroactivity: Retroactive benefits will *not* be paid for terms or programs that began and ended prior to January 5, 2021, date of enactment. However, programs of education that began prior to January 5, 2021, and have a completion date after January 5, 2021, would become payable for any additional new terms beginning on or after January 5, 2021.

In addition, these changes apply to individuals who were deemed eligible for the STEM Scholarship prior to the date of enactment, but do not begin their STEM program terms until after January 5, 2021.

As an example: If Student X is eligible for the STEM Scholarship and attends a term that runs from November 1, 2020 to January 31, 2021. That term is not payable. However, if that same Student X begins a new term on February 1, 2021, then that new term will be processed as per PL 116-315.

Questions: If you have any questions, please direct them to the Education Service [Policy & Regulations Team](#) via email.

V/R

Policy and Regulations Team

