



**COOPERATIVE EXTENSION**  
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**VA**



**U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**

Veterans Health Administration  
*Office of Rural Health*

## 7. 1 The Veterans Affairs System

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## Veterans Affairs System

The Veterans Affairs System has a history of over 80 years of providing support to service members and Veterans (Figure 7.1 a).

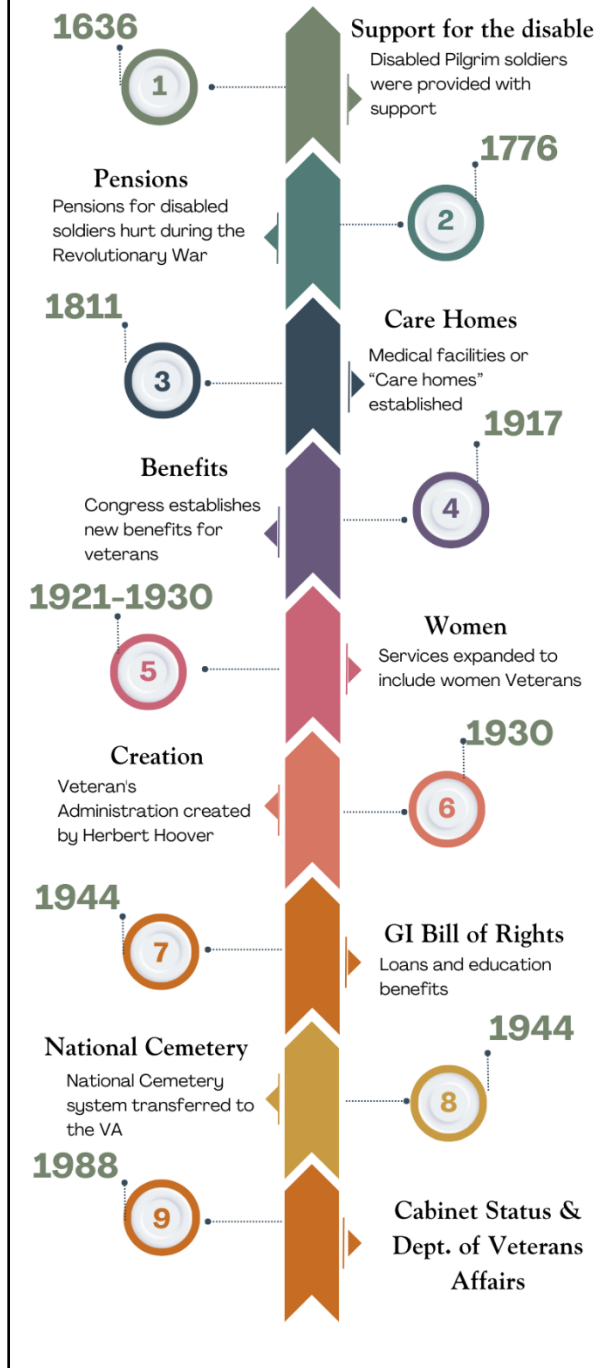
The origin of the current United States Veterans Affairs System can be linked to the time when the Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony, in 1636, were at war with the Pequot Indians. During that time, the Pilgrims passed a law supporting disabled soldiers (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023a).

In 1776, the Continental Congress offered pensions to disabled soldiers to promote enlistments. The U.S. Naval Asylum in Philadelphia was the first facility to provide institutional care for disabled and elderly Veterans. In 1811, Congress instructed the Navy Department to establish the first medical facility for Veterans. Finally, in 1834, the Naval Asylum opened its doors to beneficiaries (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023c).

By 1851, Congress approved opening a second residency for Veterans called the U.S. Soldiers' Home. It was for those who had served in the Mexican War or the Regular Army. After the Civil War, the government adopted this "home care" model on a larger scale by establishing the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers. During the 19th century, the Veterans Assistance program was expanded to include benefits and pensions for widows and dependents (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023a).

Veterans' benefits were administered by three agencies by 1921: the Veterans Bureau, the Bureau of Pensions of the Interior Department, and the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers. Additional services and system improvements took place a few years later. One crucial factor was covering disabilities that were not service-related (1924) and offering health care services to female Veterans (1928). (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023c).

## History of the Veterans Affairs (VA) System



**Figure 7.1a**

*Veterans Affairs System History*

**Source**

*U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2024*

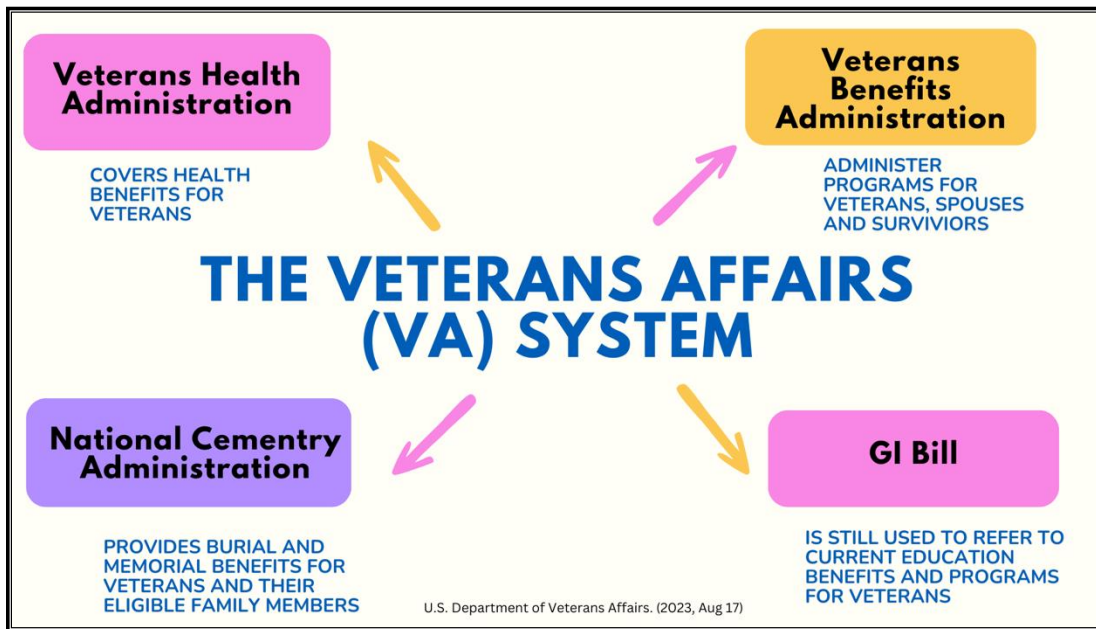
President Herbert Hoover signed Executive Order 5398 in 1930, promoting the Veterans Bureau as a federal agency—creating the Veterans Administration (VA) in this way. During that time, the National Homes and Pension Bureau joined the VA (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023a). The VA served 1.7 million Veterans and had over 31,500 employees and 35 Hospitals (House Committee on Veterans Affairs, n.d.).

In March 1989, the Department of Veterans Affairs succeeded the Veterans Administration and was responsible for providing benefits to Veterans and their dependents (House Committee on Veterans Affairs, n.d.).

[History of the Veterans Affairs System](https://department.va.gov/history/history-overview/)  
<https://department.va.gov/history/history-overview/>

### Components of the Veterans Affairs System

The Veterans Affairs System comprises four administrations: the Veterans Health Administration, the Veterans Benefits Administration, the National Cemetery Administration, and the GI Bill (Figure 7.1b)



**Figure 7.1b**  
*Veterans Affairs System Administrations*  
**Source**  
*U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023*

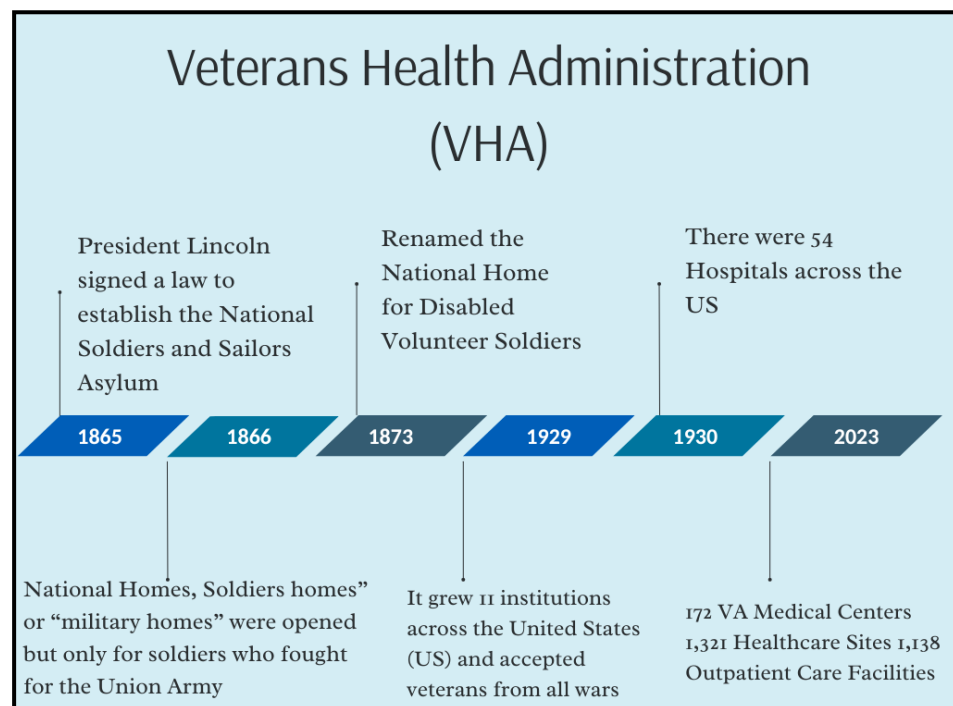
## Veteran Health Administration

The origins of the Veterans Health Administration begin in the 1800s. In March of 1865, President Abraham Lincoln signed a law establishing the national soldiers' and sailors' asylum. It was later renamed the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers in 1873. It was the first institution created for honorably discharged volunteer soldiers.

In 1866, the national homes, also called "soldiers' homes," were opened for soldiers who fought for the Union Army, including those called the "U.S. Colored Troops" and became the blueprint for federal Veteran's hospitals.

By 1929, the federal "soldiers' homes" system had grown to 11 institutions nationwide, accepting Veterans of all American wars. The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has grown and expanded its services to meet Veterans' physical and mental health needs. Some of the new programs include treatment for traumatic brain injuries, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide prevention, women Veterans, and homeless Veterans. VHA opened outpatient clinics and established other services, such as telemedicine, to accommodate a diverse Veteran population

VHA operates one of the largest healthcare systems and provides training for most of America's medical, nursing, and other health professionals. It has grown from 54 hospitals in 1930 to 1,600 healthcare facilities, including 144 VA Medical Centers and 1,232 outpatient sites of different complexity (Figure 7.1c) (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023a).



**Figure 7.1c**  
Veteran Health Administration  
**Source**  
*U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023a*

## **Veteran Benefit Administration**

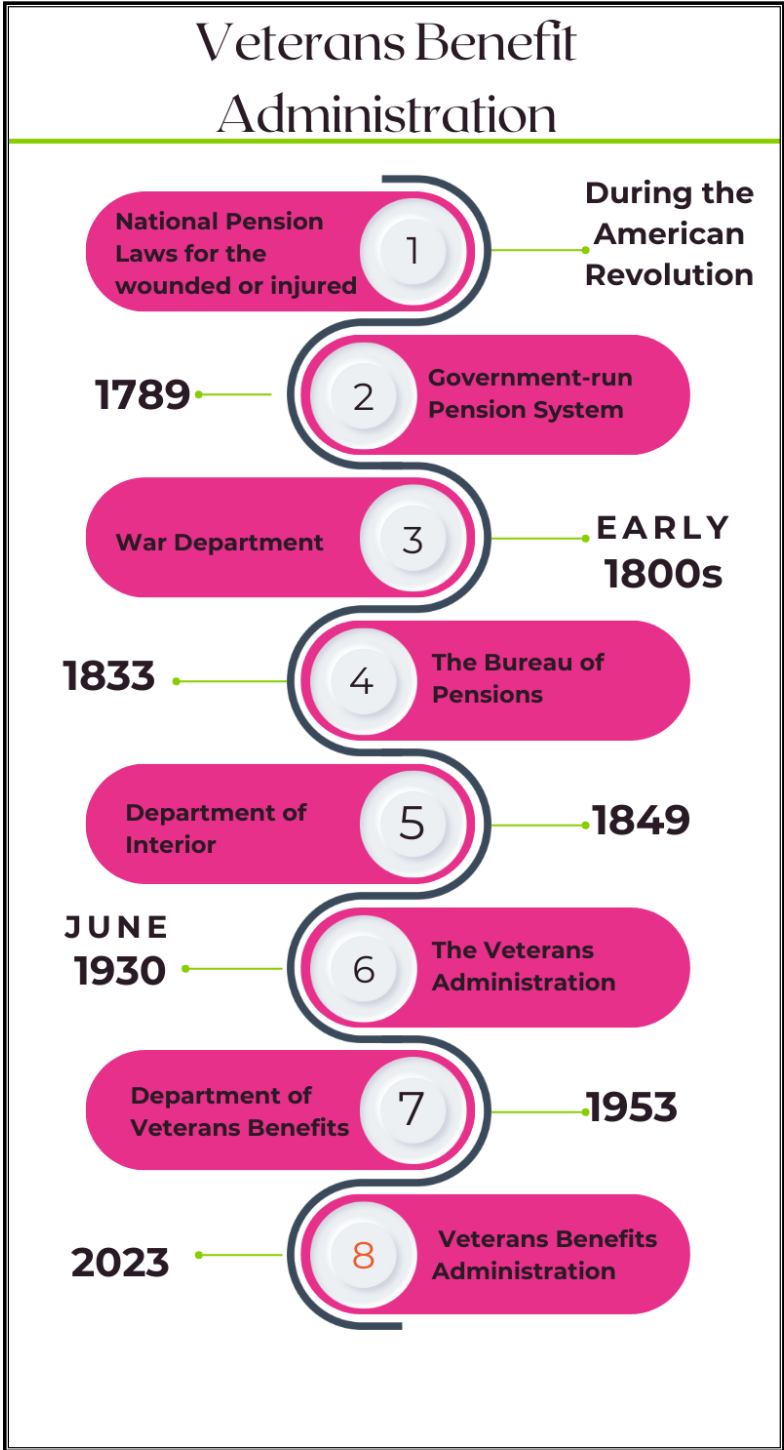
During the American Revolution, the Continental Congress passed the first national pension laws for wounded or injured soldiers. The states themselves had to distribute the pensions. It was only after 1789 that the Federal government assumed that responsibility. In the early 1800s, a small office of 3 people from the Department of War managed the work related to Veteran's claims.

In 1883, the Bureau of Pensions had 18 employees whose role was to allocate \$2-3 million in payments annually for 40,000 Veterans, widows, and dependent children.

The Congressional Act of 1849 transferred the Pension Bureau to the new Department of the Interior, which would remain until 1930. This pension system significantly grew after the Civil War. During this time, the government considered diseases contracted during military service as bases for claiming disability.

The Pension Bureau received approximately 40,000 applications annually from Union Veterans or their survivors from 1863 to 1888. A law from 1890 expanded eligibility by granting pensions to any Union.

In 1953, the VA implemented an internal reorganization that established the Department of Veterans Benefits, which was responsible for supervising all types of benefits except for insurance. In 1989, it was renamed Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). Currently, the VBA has 56 regional offices and more than 24,000 employees working at the headquarters in Washington, DC. Also, the VBA serves almost 6 million Veterans and their families. Yearly, it distributes \$135 billion in benefits and services to U.S. Veterans (Figure 7.1d) (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023a).



**Figure 7.1d**

*Veteran Benefits Administration*

**Source**

*U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023a*

## National Cemetery Administration

The foundation of all national cemeteries dates back to the Civil War. In 1862, Congress passed legislation that authorized President Lincoln to obtain cemetery grounds for the soldiers who had died during the war. The National Cemetery Act of 1867 was the first law to finance and develop national cemeteries.

In 1871, when the Union dead reburial program concluded, 300,000 remains of Army soldiers were reburied in 73 national cemeteries or soldiers' lots in private cemeteries.

By 1930, the VA was responsible for the National Homes for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers. Their burial grounds would become national cemeteries. Between 1934 and 1939, seven new cemeteries were built in major cities.

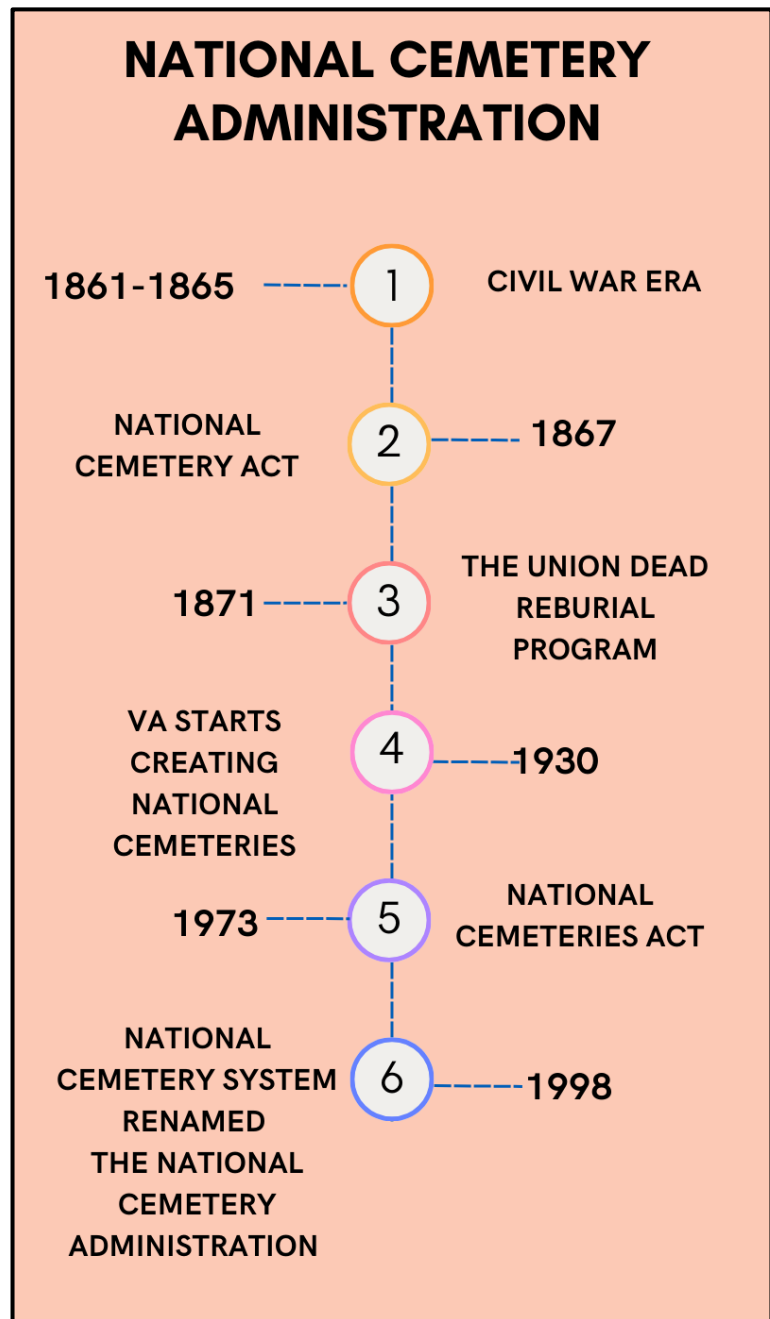
Then, the National Cemeteries Act of 1973 was enacted. It transferred the stewardship of the 112-year-old National Cemetery System from the Army to the VA. The Army retained both the Arlington National Cemetery and Soldiers' & Sailor's Home National Cemetery.

### Figure 7.1e

*National Cemetery Administration*

#### Source

*U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023a*



The Veterans Programs Enhancement Act of 1998 renamed the National Cemetery System the National Cemetery Administration (NCA), which opened 17 new cemeteries between 1997 and 2010. Since then, it has introduced memorial products to honor Veterans' service. The VA provides a headstone/marker/medallion, U.S. flag, and Presidential Memorial Certificate for those they serve.

Nowadays, the NCA system comprises more than 150 national cemeteries and soldiers' lots, and it is the only federal agency developing new Veteran cemeteries. It is one of three federal agencies responsible for managing national cemeteries in the United States. Its mission includes the oversight of most national cemeteries and the provision of grave markers for qualified Veterans (Figure 7.1e) (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023a).

### **The G.I. Bill**

The last component of the Veterans Affairs System is the GI Bill. President Roosevelt signed into law the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, also known as the G.I. Bill, in 1944. It gave World War II Veterans funds for college education, unemployment insurance, and housing (National Archives, 2022). The Act aimed to help Veterans between military discharge and civilian reemployment. The GI Bill also provided unemployment benefits of \$20 per week for a maximum of 52 weeks. The initial goal was to support those who served so they could successfully transition back into civilian life (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023a).

An essential provision of the G.I. Bill was to provide low-interest, zero-down payment home loans for service members, with more favorable terms for new construction than existing housing. Unfortunately, at that time, not all Veterans could take advantage of the benefits of the G.I. Bill. Black Veterans, for instance, were often unable to get loans for mortgages in Black or white suburban neighborhoods (National Archives, 2022).

When the G.I. Bill expired in 1956, the education and training part had disbursed \$14.5 billion to Veterans. In addition to education benefits, it provided government-guaranteed loans for purchasing a home, business, or farm and medical care. Since then, it has helped qualifying Veterans and their family members get money to cover all or some of the costs for school or training. However, the GI Bill has been revamped and extended many times. Close to 2.3 million

Veterans participated in the program during the Korean War epoch and more than 8 million during the Vietnam era (National Archives, 2022).

In 1984, Congressman Gillespie V. Montgomery enhanced the G.I. Bill. This version was called The Montgomery G.I. Bill. This benefit could be used for degree and certificate programs, flight training, apprenticeship/on-the-job training, and correspondence courses if the Veteran was enrolled full-time (American Legion, n.d.). This program is still available to any service member who served at least two years on active duty. They have to be honorably discharged and meet specific requirements in different categories. The Bill stipulates that active-duty members must renounce from their military pay \$100 monthly for 12 months or make a lump-sum contribution of \$1,200 before separation. Another restriction is that Veterans must use their benefits ten years before their last active-duty discharge (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023b).

On June 30, 2008, Congress approved an extension of the current G.I. Bill. It was called the Post-9/11 GI Bill or Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008. This Act expanded benefits for members of the military who served on active duty after September 11, 2001. Beginning in August 2009, recipients became eligible for expanded benefits or the total cost of any public college in their state. The new bill also provides a housing allowance and up to \$1,000 yearly stipend for books, among other benefits for Veterans and G.I. Bill-qualifying spouses (Dortch, 2012). Many Post-9/11 GI Bill-eligible recipients are eligible for multiple educational assistance programs such as the Montgomery GI Bill-Active Duty or the Montgomery GI Bill-Selected Reserve (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023b).

#### [GI Bill Qualifications](https://www.va.gov/education/eligibility/)

<https://www.va.gov/education/eligibility/>

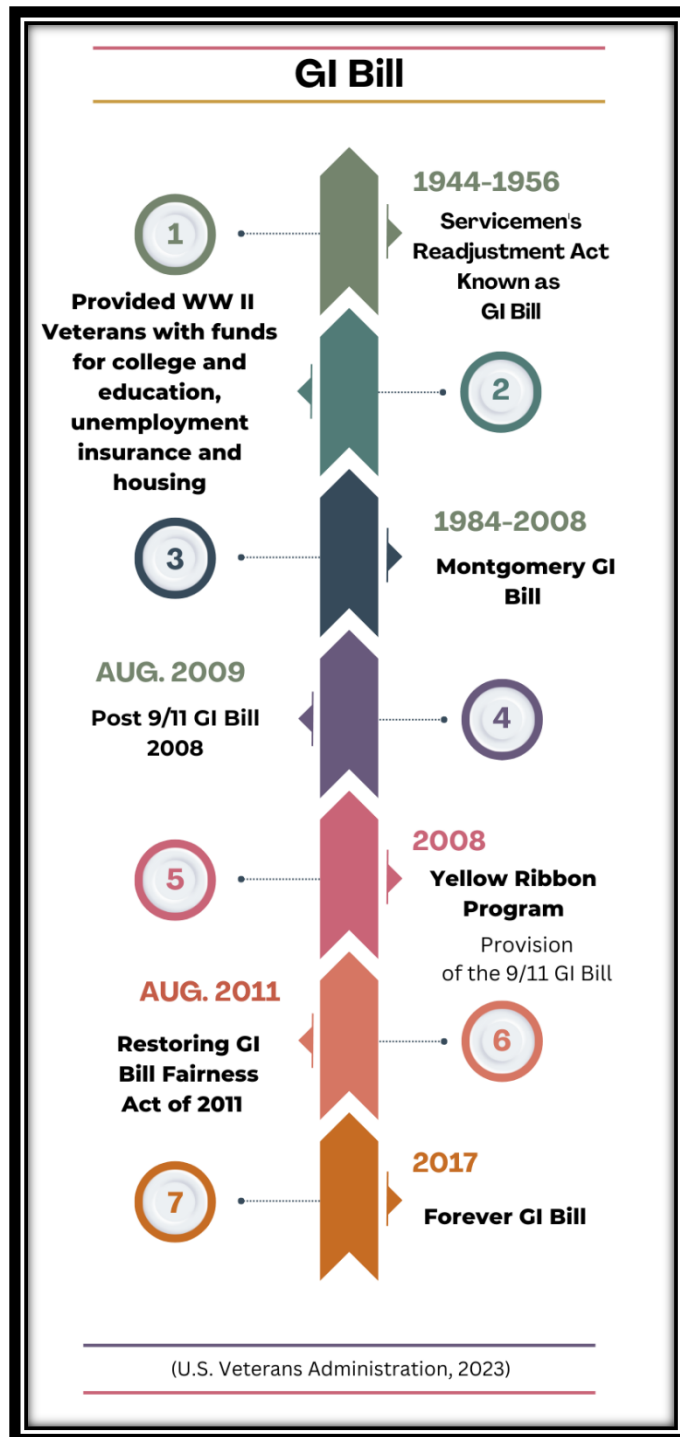
Another provision of the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill is the Yellow Ribbon GI Education Enhancement Program or Yellow Ribbon Program. It allows higher education institutions to voluntarily partner with the VA to cover tuition and fee expenses that exceed the VA's maximum payable amount (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.).

#### [Yellow Ribbon Program](https://benefits.va.gov/BENEFITS/factsheets/education/Post-911_Yellow_Ribbon.pdf)

[https://benefits.va.gov/BENEFITS/factsheets/education/Post-911\\_Yellow\\_Ribbon.pdf](https://benefits.va.gov/BENEFITS/factsheets/education/Post-911_Yellow_Ribbon.pdf)

Over the years, Congress has often enacted the GI Bill to make improvements. The latest effort was in 2017, when President Trump signed the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017 (Representative Roe, 2017), also known as the Forever GI Bill. One of the main changes in the provision of the Post-9/11 GI Bill is the elimination of the periods of time for when the benefits can be used. For Veterans, there are no delimiting dates for those released from active duty on or after January 1st, 2013. There are no delimiting dates for spouses using benefits transferred from a Veteran discharged on or after the same date and for recipients of the Fry Scholarship who became eligible on or after January 1, 2013. Other Post-9/11 GI Bill-eligible candidates must use their 36-month entitlement within 15 years of discharge or release, or by a specified age. Another pivotal provision permits the restoration of GI Bill entitlement for individuals affected by school closures and disapproved education programs since 2015. Other amendments increase benefit levels for several groups, including but not limited to Purple Heart recipients, Fry scholarship recipients, reservists on active duty on the first day of the month, and people with a minimum of 6 months of qualifying service and a maximum of 12 months.

Finally, the Colmery Act also authorizes a five-year High Technology Pilot Program. The program aimed to provide GI Bill-eligible Veterans the opportunity to enroll in high technology education programs that are not GI Bill-approved, such as coding boot camps. Additionally, it directs the VA to revisit claims for disability compensation based on exposure to mustard gas or lewisite during World War II that had been denied before the date of enactment of the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017 (Figure 7.1f) (Dortch, C., 2017).



**Figure 7.1f**

GI Bill

Source

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023

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