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(Pittsburgh, PA) -- Armed forces members serving within the United States would be eligible for the same education benefits as those serving abroad, under new legislation proposed by Congressman Jason Altmire of suburban Pittsburgh (D-PA-4).

National Guard and reserve members could qualify for more than \$24,000 in annual education aid if Altmire's bill is passed.

Currently, soldiers and sailors need 90 days of overseas duty to qualify for education benefits under the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill. But Altmire says that's unfair to the men and women serving in a more domestically-focused role.

"If they are training for deployment, if they're responding to a domestic emergency like those who responded after the September 11 attacks in New York City and at the Pentagon, people who are responding to natural disasters like Katrina, the oil spill where we have people along the Mexican border, if there is a federal deployment along the border, those are things that would qualify."

The education benefits package covers tuition as high as that of the most expensive state-owned university. Also included are a book stipend of \$1,000 and cost-of-living coverage that varies depending on the soldier's location.

Altmire says about 19,000 Pennsylvanians would qualify for the federal money, including about 6700 from the Pittsburgh region. All 14 schools owned by the state have a yearly tuition of \$5,804.

The Congressman says the measure would boost recruitment and retention rates in the National Guard and armed forces reserves.

Altmire says with support from veterans' groups and both chambers of Congress, he expects the bill to be signed into law later this year.