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## **TN Guardsmen have more educational opportunities than ever**

**NASHVILLE, Tenn.** – With Gov. Bill Lee’s expansion of the STRONG Act on May 17, there is no better time for Tennessee National Guardsmen to take advantage of incentives and benefits regarding their civilian education. While programs like the GI Bill and Federal Tuition Assistance have been around for some time, improvements to the Tennessee STRONG Act offer more educational options than ever before. Guardsmen can graduate with a bachelor’s degree, master’s degree, or attend a technical school almost completely debt-free.

“Now is the perfect time to take advantage of these programs,” said Sgt. 1st Class Stephen Biase, Tennessee STRONG Act Manager, Army. “Now that the STRONG Act has been expanded, there are more opportunities than ever for a Guardsman.”

Gov. Bill Haslam signed the Tennessee STRONG Act (Support, Training, and Renewing Opportunity for National Guardsmen) in 2017. The legislation provides reimbursement to an educational institution in the amount equal to 100% of the maximum resident undergraduate in-state tuition. This is a great benefit, but a new amendment to the STRONG Act has made it even better.

Gov. Bill Lee signed an expansion to the STRONG Act in May, affording additional opportunities for Guardsmen. Soldiers and Airmen can now receive up to 40 hours per semester of reimbursement towards graduate degrees. It also provides reimbursement towards degrees at Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology. These technical schools offer a wide range of programs such as Automotive Technician, Information Technology, and Nursing. In total, the Tennessee STRONG Act is available at 75 schools across the state.

“The Tennessee STRONG Act amendment extends eligibility for tuition reimbursement to now include technical certificates and diplomas, as well as graduate programs,” said Chief Warrant Officer 4 Clarisse Bernier, Education and Incentives Branch Chief. “It provides education opportunities for those who protect and serve our State while encouraging a strong partnership between the Tennessee National Guard, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, and the Tennessee Board of Regents.”

In addition to the STRONG Act, Guardsmen can still use various other education programs such as the GI Bill, Federal Tuition Assistance, and the Student Loan Repayment Program.



GI Bill programs can provide Soldiers and Airmen various educational incentives depending on a Guard member's eligibility. They can cover undergraduate and graduate degrees as well as technical schools and certificates. GI Bill programs can offer direct payment to Guardsmen for enrollment fees, books, and supplies.

Federal Tuition Assistance provides financial assistance for off-duty education programs. It will pay up to \$250 per semester hour and up to 16 semester hours per fiscal year. FTA can be combined with the Tennessee STRONG Act, providing even more incentives to Guardsmen looking to obtain higher education degrees or certificates.

If Soldiers or Airmen have already incurred student loan debt, student loan repayment programs are also available. Guardsmen can receive up to \$50,000 in student loan repayments based on their contract.

Realistically, a Guardsman can obtain a college degree without paying a cent in tuition right now. And even if they already have a degree, graduate degrees are now more accessible than ever.

“These programs are huge door-openers,” said Sgt. Secret Woode, a Recruiting and Retention Battalion Non-Commissioned Officer. “With all the options available to Guardsmen right now, there’s never been a better time to capitalize on these incentives being offered across the board.”

To learn more about how these incentives can benefit you, contact the education and incentives office at Joint Force Headquarters in Nashville, or visit them online at [www.tn.gov/programs-benefits/education-incentives.html](http://www.tn.gov/programs-benefits/education-incentives.html).



Members of the Tennessee National Guard Education and Incentives Office pose with Gov. Bill Lee, May 17, after he signed an amendment to the Tennessee STRONG Act, at Berry Field Air Force Base, in Nashville. The new legislation affords more educational opportunities for members of the Tennessee National Guard, to include payment for attending Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology and reimbursement towards tuition for graduate degrees. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Timothy Cordeiro)

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