

PROPER REWARD FOR VETERANS

New program provides job training help for older candidates

The capacity of our national heart is measured in part by how we honor our military veterans. Providing job skills is one way Americans show our appreciation to those who have defended our nation and our way of life. Sometimes, though, older veterans kind of fall through the cracks and don't always qualify for job-training programs that are available to those who more recently left military service.

Fortunately, that old need is being met by a new program, the Veteran Retraining Assistance Program (VRAP), which has shown rapid growth nationally and is available locally through Clark College's veterans affairs office. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs is aggressively promoting VRAP, and The Columbian is glad to help spread the news. VRAP is available for unemployed military veterans 35-60 years old who are not eligible for other VA education benefits, are not enrolled in federal or state job programs and do not receive VA aid because of being unemployable.

The assistance for vocational training is considerable, certainly enough to catch the eye of any veteran who might be eligible: up to \$1,473 per month for 12 months, with the added benefit of becoming qualified in high-demand areas such as health care, management and legal services.

A Thursday story in The Columbian reported that more than 27,000 unemployed veterans have applied nationally; that's more than half the number of allotted slots for fiscal year 2012. The VRAP program will serve 99,000 veterans nationwide, including 45,000 in the coming school year and 54,000 in 2013-2014.

Here in Clark County, about 40 veterans have inquired about VRAP assistance, and the one- or two-per-day inquiries are expected to quickly increase as the public awareness campaign continues.

Veterans can apply for VRAP online at <http://gibill.va.gov>. Click on "VOW to Hire Heroes" at the bottom of the page. Locally, more information is available through Clark College's veterans affairs office: http://www.clark.edu/admissions_fin_aid/fin_aid/veterans.php.

VRAP is one of several educational and vocational programs available to veterans. Others sources of financial aid include the Post-9/11 GI Bill, the Montgomery GI Bill, Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Assistance and other programs such as Clark College's 25 percent tuition discount for qualified veterans. Slightly more than 500 former members of the armed forces are attending Clark College with benefits under various VA programs.

Here are two case studies of VRAP candidates: Locally, Vernon Mitchell, 49, lost his job six months ago, and his college benefits under the GI Bill expired in 2001. But because he served in the Army from 1987 to 1991, Mitchell has applied for VRAP and believes the retraining assistance will postpone any need for student loans. Also, an Associated Press story described the encouraging path chosen by Chester Dixon in Atlanta, who at 60 barely met the VRAP cut-off age but is using his service in the Army's 82nd Airborne Division during the 1970s to apply. His wife just retired, and Dixon plans to use the new retraining assistance program to pursue a career in water-waste management or sales, two categories listed as high-demand fields.

The VA plans to spend a little more than \$76 million over two years for VRAP. The most attractive aspect of this program — for veterans — is that it fills a need for veterans who do not qualify under other programs. And the best part of VRAP — for all Americans — is that it provides a new way to say "thanks" to those who help defend our nation.