



SNAPSHOT

Supporting Tennessee Veterans in Postsecondary Education: The Helping Heroes Grant Program

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In 2008, the General Assembly established the Helping Heroes Grant program to provide qualifying veterans with lottery-funded financial aid to help offset the cost of postsecondary education. State law requires the Comptroller’s Office to periodically review the effectiveness of the grant program. Prior reviews were performed in 2014 and 2018. This publication reviews the Helping Heroes program for the academic years 2017-18 through 2020-21.

Key Points

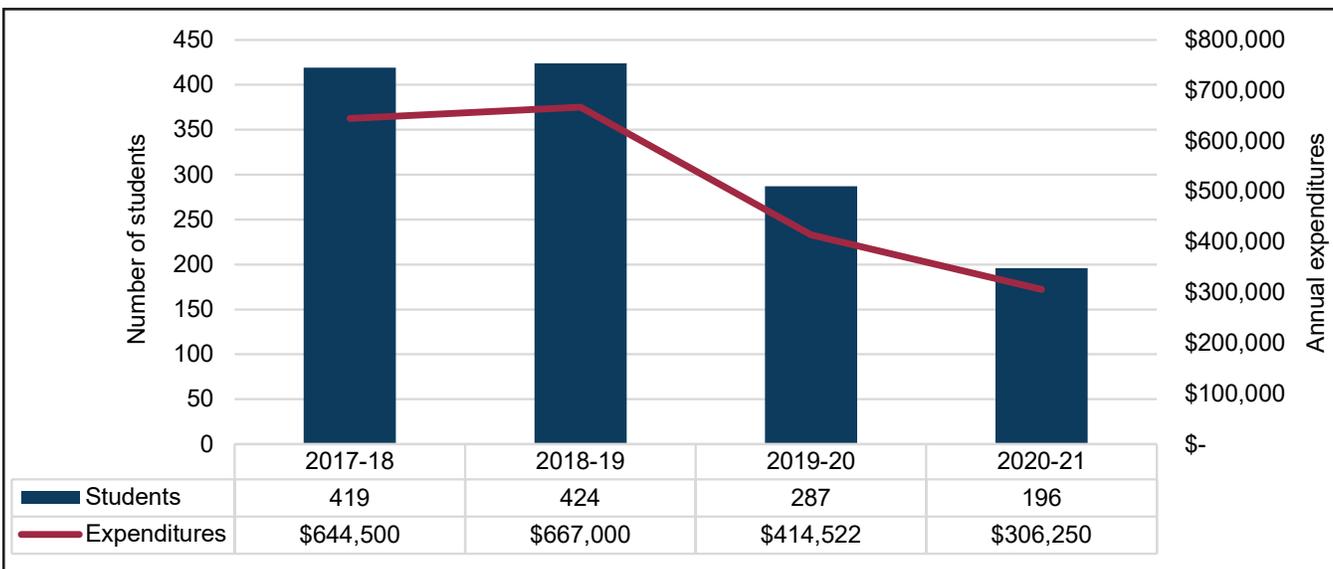
Helping Heroes Grants are either \$500 per semester for part-time students or \$1,000 per semester for full-time students.

Eligibility includes but it is not limited to having been awarded either the Iraq Campaign Medal, the Afghanistan Campaign Medal, the Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal on or after September 11, 2001, or a service expeditionary medal to be specified by rule as the Inherent Resolve Campaign Medal.

In the Helping Heroes Grant program, the number of participating students and the amount of grant expenditures have both declined since 2018-19.

There were 196 grant recipients for 2020-21 compared to 419 grant recipients in academic year 2017-18, a decrease of 53 percent. Between 2018 and 2021 there was an average of 332 students per year with average annual expenditures of \$508,068.

Exhibit 1: Helping Heroes Grants recipients and expenditures by academic year



Source: Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation Board Report.

Among Helping Heroes Grant recipients, the number of bachelor's degrees, associate degrees, and certificates awarded decreased by more than a third from 2017-18 to 2020-21.

From academic years 2013-14 through 2019-20, Helping Heroes Grant recipients consistently completed over 190 associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, and certificates annually. In academic year 2017-18, the number of such awards completed was 222. In 2020-21, however, the number of awards had dropped to 143, a reduction of almost 36 percent from three academic classes earlier.

The decrease in awards and general program participation aligns with a decrease in service members engaged in qualifying military activities. Twenty years removed from 9/11 and over a decade since peak levels of members of the armed services in the combat theaters of the Middle East, there are fewer qualifying veterans in the pool for potential grants.

Most Helping Heroes funding was received by Locally Governed Institutions. Austin Peay State University enrolled the most Helping Heroes Grant recipients between 2017 and 2021, receiving \$591,500 in grant funds. Middle Tennessee State University received the second highest amount of Helping Heroes Grant funds at \$409,500, followed by the University of Tennessee – Knoxville with \$160,000. Pellissippi State Community College received \$111,000 for its Helping Heroes students, the most of any community college.

The Comptroller's Office has included policy options for the General Assembly in its report. These options include encouraging greater public awareness of Helping Heroes Grants as well as amending state law concerning the value of the grant and the possible use of Helping Heroes Grants at Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology.

To read the report, visit the Comptroller's OREA website at tncot.cc/orea.