

# GI Bill Benefits @ Howard University

## (Errors Cost Student Vets Benefits)



Tiahna Pantovich, 26, sounds exhausted as she recounts the months of administrative bumbles at Howard University that forced her out of her home in the Washington, D.C., area.

She spent the better part of four years as an Arabic and Spanish linguist at [Fort Hood](#), Texas, earning the [GI Bill](#) benefits that would support a blossoming academic career.

An associate's degree at the Defense Language Institute was followed by degrees from Central Texas College and the University of Michigan. Now, she's only nine months from completing her master's in social work at Howard University, a school she loves.

But in January, she says, Howard, a prestigious Washington, D.C. school, botched her certification to the [Department of Veterans Affairs](#), misreporting her degree program. That meant she didn't get the housing stipend that goes along with the support she earned through her military service for two months.

She received the withheld funds in March, but missing out on the critical housing allowances for that long put her on the verge of losing her home in the suburbs outside of D.C., where rent is sky high. That, on top of other issues Howard has had managing [veteran benefits](#), led Pantovich to seek cheaper housing an hour away from campus. She'll soon be relocating to Baltimore to cut her rent nearly in half.

A school official recommended she go to a food bank for help. Fortunately, Women Veterans Interactive, an advocacy group, gave her a \$2,000 grant to help cover bills.

"I am being displaced by my own school," Pantovich told Military.com. "I don't want a blanket and a bagged sandwich. I deserve much better than that, not to be displaced. I am having to pack up my home and leave because [Howard University] dropped the ball."

An investigation by Military.com found a pattern of clerical errors impacting student veterans at Howard University. This history of mistakes culminated in the school receiving word on April 5 that it would soon lose its GI Bill status for any new students.

For at least the past year, Howard repeatedly has mishandled veteran education benefits, the investigation revealed. Beyond the issues Pantovich described that imperiled her housing, other veterans have reported disappearing or incorrect paperwork. And until Howard fixes its eligibility issues with the VA, the government won't foot the bill for any new GI Bill students to attend the school.

The GI Bill is more than college tuition. Many argue it's one of the government's most successful programs aimed at giving veterans a clear path to the middle class, and one of the most powerful [recruitment](#) tools for the Defense Department. The roughly 1 million student veterans and beneficiaries who use it every year also receive a book stipend and a housing allowance, which can amount to around \$2,000 per month in the D.C. area. Many rely on that allowance to pay their rent or mortgage.

In April the District of Columbia's State Approving Agency, or SAA, revoked Howard University's ability to allow newly enrolled student veterans to use their GI Bill benefits. The decision took effect June 15, triggering a 60-day window for Howard to fix its eligibility issues to avoid a longer and more consequential suspension that could impact all GI Bill beneficiaries and could be permanent. SAAs have authority delegated from the VA to audit some 4,000 schools so veterans do not waste their taxpayer-funded scholarship on bogus institutions.



**Tiahna Pantovich**

An official with the D.C. SAA who worked on Howard's suspension told Military.com they could not discuss the specifics of the situation because they are not authorized to speak to the press. The D.C. SAA did not respond to multiple requests for on-the-record interviews.

It's rare that a state agency strips a school's GI Bill eligibility. Founded in 1867, Howard is an elite university and one of the most prestigious historically Black colleges in the country. Such a move is typically reserved for predatory schools deemed to be providing minimal education to students for exorbitant fees. In this case, Howard's loss of eligibility is tied to administrative issues.

A VA spokesperson told Military.com in a statement that the D.C. SAA suspended the school to afford time to "correct GI Bill approval deficiencies." The school was quickly scrubbed after losing accreditation in June from the VA's database, which allows veterans to compare schools easily and see how their benefits would work at each institution. As of Dec. 31, the agency's most recent data, 235 students using the GI Bill were enrolled at Howard.

The suspension does not impact any currently enrolled beneficiaries, the spokesperson added.

School spokesman Frank Tramble said this year's process for filing for eligibility with the VA is different than previous years. New rules with the D.C. SAA caught the school off guard when the university submitted its paperwork on March 22, with the decertification of the school effective June 15, he said. Tramble said he couldn't point to the specific bureaucratic changes Howard had missed. Howard has since refiled its application with the D.C. SAA. Tramble said he believes the D.C. SAA will make a final decision before the end of the weekend, although that is after tuition bills for students were due Aug. 9 for the fall semester. Sunday marks the end of the 60-day period granted to Howard to fix paperwork errors or face continued suspension and harsher VA-related penalties.

"This is not something we're very happy about; we expect this weekend to have a final decision on our status," Tramble told Military.com in an interview. "From our understanding, there are new requirements that weren't there before. It's very unique to this year. We had to go on a 60-day suspension to complete the rest of the work."

Joseph Wescott, who previously served as president of the National Association of State Approving Agencies, or NASAA, which oversees SAAs, said agencies are flexible with schools, adding that cracking down on legitimate schools over paperwork snafus is rare.

He characterized NASAA as "the gatekeepers of quality," with the goal being to "protect the integrity of the GI Bill" and shield veterans from predatory and underwhelming schools.

"Most schools of this stature don't want us having this conversation, which makes this confusing," Wescott told Military.com. "There would've been multiple requests before suspensions."

## **A Pattern of Failing Veterans**

At the center of Howard's connection between the university and the VA is Christopher Rhone, the school's coordinator for student veterans. It's common for major universities to have full-time staff to assist student veterans with their benefits, and sometimes act as a middle man between the student and the VA. When Military.com reached out to Rhone by phone, he declined an interview request, saying he wasn't authorized by the school to talk to the press.

Multiple students described problems with Rhone -- that he consistently mishandled paperwork and did not warn them in time that the school had lost its GI Bill eligibility for new students.

Leana Mason, 27, recently moved to the D.C. area from California and is paying around \$1,700 in rent. She signed a lease and is one of the new students who is set to be impacted by Howard losing its status as a GI Bill-approved school. She is a Ph.D. candidate, on the hook for an enormous tuition bill. She painted a picture of Howard's being uncommunicative and failing to warn incoming students they won't be able to use their tuition or earn their housing allowance.

"I only found out about this suspension after a discussion with other students [in July]," Mason told Military.com.



**Leana Mason**

Mason submitted all the required documentation to Rhone in May so she could use her GI Bill but did not hear back, she said. On June 15, the school lost its GI Bill credentials. Yet on June 21, Rhone told her in emails reviewed by Military.com she would be able to attend with her military scholarship. She wouldn't find out for another month that the GI Bill would be no good at Howard.

"I would be more than happy to assist you with requesting your VA benefits," school officials with the veteran's office wrote to Mason a week after the school lost its GI Bill status with new students like her. The email made no mention of the problem.

That day, the school gave her a list of documents to fill out that she returned within hours. The following day, June 22, Rhone asked more questions about documents that she told him she already had submitted. Again, there was no mention her GI Bill benefits were at risk of being useless for the upcoming fall semester.

On July 22, the school held a webinar during which officials told students that Howard gave the VA all the documents needed for certification, according to two students who attended. Officials told students the problem would be resolved in a week. It was not.

"They muted us and closed the chat," Mason said about the webinar. She added that a lot of students had questions that were not answered and university officials offered only vague responses.

Tramble, the school's spokesperson, said students were asked to submit questions ahead of time and some live questions were taken. It's unclear why the school waited more than two months to answer questions about critical GI Bill issues. Tramble said emails were sent out to student veterans warning of the issue. Students who spoke to Military.com said they did not get a notice ahead of the webinar.

Tramble added that Howard is considering creating a stipend program for impacted veterans if it fails to secure eligibility in the coming days. It's unclear whether that program would come to fruition, and no details on who would get checks or how much they would receive have been released.

Another student who spoke to Military.com on the condition of anonymity, fearing retaliation from the school, painted a similar picture of constant paperwork issues. She is \$16,000 in debt to the school after she says staff mishandled her paperwork, misreporting her major and telling the VA she is in a program that doesn't exist.

Because of these issues, she lost out on the full housing stipends she was entitled to in fall 2020 and eventually was cut off from the stipend and her tuition payments. She is not sure whether she can go back to school and instead is looking for temporary and permanent positions in the [Army Reserve](#).

Aniela Szymanski, a veterans issues [attorney with Representing Heroes](#), an advocacy organization, said in an interview with Military.com that problems with botched paperwork and delayed benefits aren't normal. She also suggests the case with Howard is a warning to all GI Bill beneficiaries that, even with prestigious schools, students need to be vigilant to ensure their institution is veteran-friendly.

"I think that the big shocking part here is not keeping students informed," Szymanski told Military.com. "Students have to be proactive, and if something looks off, if there are delays, if they can't get straight answers, they need to call the [GI Bill hotline](#). The school is biased; perhaps they won't always be the most forthcoming to protect their reputation. The next best option is to work with the school to delay starting."

## **Howard Loses Its Eligibility**

State agencies generally favor giving institutions accreditation when there's any doubt, according to Wescott. Suspending one comes with huge consequences for veterans, displacing them from their school and costing them their income from stipends.

"It's the state approval agency, not the state disapproval agency," Wescott said. "The process is not complicated; it's very straightforward. Suspension is a last resort."

The Protect GI Bill Act, federal legislation signed into law in January, strengthened laws protecting student veterans from fraudulent schools and gave teeth to state approving agencies by clarifying that they could cut off schools from GI Bill money. In some cases, that can be a huge chunk of a school's income.

None of the experts who spoke with Military.com had heard of other schools besides Howard losing eligibility since the new law went into effect.

Howard's issues may stem from trouble navigating the VA's bureaucracy and may not be indicative of the school's overall quality, as there's no evidence Howard is predatory toward veterans.

Carrie Wofford, the president of Veterans Education Success, an advocacy group that often lobbies Congress on GI Bill issues, told Military.com that Howard surely has issues with processing veteran benefits, but it's a relatively small fish compared to a wide array of what she called fraudulent schools that SAAs have taken no action against.

"It would be a disgrace if VA were to cut off Howard for paperwork compliance but not do anything about the known fraudsters," Wofford said. "VA and the D.C. SAA should help Howard figure out the paperwork issues and resolve it. Howard is arguably the most important historically Black college in the country and provides a great education. VA should be helping great schools and focusing any punishment on fraudsters."

Last year, the Trump administration suspended education benefits for new students at five universities for deceptive enrollment practices aimed at veterans. The colleges included the University of Phoenix, which a year earlier was required to refund \$50 million and cancel another \$141 million in debt for its marketing practices toward student veterans.

Colorado Technical University, American InterContinental University, Bellevue University and Temple University also were included. The VA ultimately backed down from plans to bar the schools, despite veteran organizations clamoring for the agency to crack down on predatory schools, mostly in the for-profit sector.

Will Hubbard, the vice president for veterans and military policy for Veterans Education Success, told Military.com that Howard simply doesn't appear to have the useful "institutional" relationship with the military community or the VA. He said oftentimes the schools that are the best at paperwork are those that use predatory tactics to recruit veterans or set up non-accredited programs.

In 2018, the VA inspector general warned the department could waste \$2.3 billion in payments to "ineligible colleges" through 2023. In the bulk of cases, the payments would go to for-profit universities or bogus schools. Howard is a private, not-for-profit school.

"There is no shortage of bad schools," Hubbard said. "Some of the worst schools are the best at paperwork."

Still, Howard's history of mishandling paperwork for existing students has led to gaps in funding, like the one experienced by Pantovich, gaps that have made it difficult for students to complete degrees.

"They told the VA the wrong program," she said. "My funding stopped in January, and I begged the school to fix it. I told them I'd go into debt; I'm stuck in a lease I couldn't afford. I told them this needed to happen."

"I want to finish my degree; I'm nine months away. I love Howard. It is not the institution; it's the middle man in the handoff."

[Source: Military.com | Steve Beynon | August 11, 2021 ++]