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Feds launch nursing program aimed at vets

By **Ashok Selvam**
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The White House, via first lady Michelle Obama, **today unveiled** a program to aid combat medics and other military personnel earn nursing licenses after they leave the armed services.

The four-year training is for veterans interested in entry-level, registered nurses jobs. HHS' Health Resources and Services Administration will administer the program in conjunction with the Defense and Veteran's Affairs departments. Under the program, HHS would award grants to up to nine nursing schools, allotting them a maximum of $350,000 each per year.

The deadline for veterans to apply for a grant is June 7, and HHS hopes to award the money by Sept. 30.

“The Veterans' Bachelor of Science in Nursing Program recognizes the skills, experience and sacrifices of our veterans, while helping to grow our nursing workforce,” HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius **said in a release.** “It helps veterans formalize their skills to get jobs, while strengthening Americans' access to care.”

As part of the program, the government will pay nursing schools to increase veteran enrollment and to find more ways to give veterans academic credit. The program also aims to establish mentors and a nursing career ladder

program targeting veterans. It's too early to say if the program has a chance to be expanded, an HRSA spokesman said.

“The VBSN project will provide program participants with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to succeed in passing the National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses and will provide a means of giving academic credit for prior military medical training and experience,” the program's synopsis reads. Overall last year in the U.S., 194,898 took the **National Council's RN test and 79.51%, or 154,963, passed (PDF)**.

Critics have argued it's too difficult for veterans to earn certifications in nursing and other professions because the licensing process ignores military experiences. They argue that members of the armed forces have undergone some of the training nurses need and that should count toward a nursing license. They want the government to make it easier for veterans to transition into a professional nursing career, saying any increase to the workforce would alleviate nursing shortages.

“But too often, because of red tape, or outdated rules, or simple lack of coordination, our men and women in uniform come home only to find that the training and experience they've gotten during their time in uniform simply doesn't count,” the first lady said today at a White House forum announcing the program. “Or they discover that the credits that they've earned in military courses don't actually transfer when they enroll in college, so they're turned away from jobs that they're more than qualified to do.”

However, some nursing advocates worry that combat medic experience doesn't necessarily mean a military member is immediately qualified for a nursing career. Sandy Summers, executive director for the Baltimore-based advocacy group, the Truth About Nursing, compared a military member's medic experience to a paramedic. That training may be too narrow,

she said.

“It's about helping people; nursing is about helping people live life to it fullest, to be as well as possible,” Summers said. “It's just not about tying a tourniquet and calling it a day.”

Summers lauded the sacrifices the military members make overseas, but wondered if their experiences centered too much on traumatic injuries versus the variety of cases nurses face. She sees the HHS program as beneficial to the field, as long as the training standards are kept high.

President Barack Obama last year announced the Defense Department's Military Credentialing and Licensing Task Force to help veterans transition to civilian life. Along with the nursing program, today the White House announced the launch of a credentialing program that will help train military members so they could embark on careers in the information technology industry. That program aims to train as many as 161,000 service members in jobs including computer programming, quality assurance engineering and IT security analysis. The credentialing program drew corporate supporters from Cisco Systems, Microsoft Corp. and Oracle, among others.

Ashok Selvam

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