

Edith Nourse Rogers

A Pioneer for Women, Military Veterans, and US Medical Education

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ABSTRACT

This year is the 80th anniversary of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. The passage of this seminal legislation – sponsored by Edith Nourse Rogers – formalized the role of women in the US military and compensated them for their service and in the event of injury or illness. Rogers was a pioneer in her own right. A trailblazer for women and a staunch advocate for military veterans' healthcare, Rogers was forged by her wartime experiences. The authors describe Rogers' contributions as a congresswoman during World War II and during her 35 years of public service in the House of Representatives. Congresswoman Rogers was foundational to the modern US healthcare system.

KEYWORDS: veterans; military personnel; military medicine; school admission criteria, schools, medical; education, medical; women

Introduction



Edith Nourse Rogers
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edith_Nourse_Rogers

This year (2022) is the 80th anniversary of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. The passage of this seminal legislation – sponsored by Edith Nourse Rogers – formalized the role of women in the US military and compensated them for their service and in the event of injury or illness.¹ Like the landmark legislation, its sponsor was a pioneer in her own right. Only five women had been elected to the US House of Representatives before Edith Nourse Rogers entered Congress in 1925.² In fact, American women had only recently been granted the right to vote with the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920.

A trailblazer for women and a staunch advocate for military veterans' healthcare, Edith Nourse Rogers was forged by her wartime experiences. During World War I, she served with the Women's Overseas Service League at military field hospitals in France and with the American Red Cross at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC.^{3,4} As a congresswoman during World War II, she advocated for women's participation in healthcare and in the military, establishing the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps and allocating a permanent nursing corps for the Department of Veterans Affairs.⁵ During

her 35 years of public service in the House of Representatives, Congresswoman Rogers was foundational to the modern US healthcare system, and her legacy carries on to today.

Congresswoman Rogers laid the groundwork for a national network of veterans' hospitals through her input to the Veterans Administration Act of 1930.⁶ This legislation significantly expanded the number of veterans' hospitals under the care of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). From 1931 to 1941, the number of VA hospital beds nearly doubled, increasing from 33,669 beds at 64 hospitals to 61,849 beds at 91 hospitals across the country.⁶ Today, the Department of Veterans Affairs is the largest integrated healthcare system in the United States, with 171 hospitals and a total of 1,293 clinics and other facilities.⁷

As perhaps her most lasting legacy, Congresswoman Rogers cosponsored the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (more commonly referred to as the GI Bill). Within a decade of being signed into law, the GI Bill resulted in over 7 million servicemembers enrolling in educational and training programs, including degrees in medicine and other healthcare fields.⁸ As chair of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, she was instrumental in sustaining the GI Bill for future generations of veterans. She ensured the passage of the Veterans Readjustment Assistance Act of 1952, which extended GI Bill benefits beyond World War II to military veterans of the Korean War.⁹ Congresswoman Rogers served in the House until her death in 1960.

In 2017, the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017 (commonly referred to as the Forever GI Bill) was signed into law, amending the GI Bill and endowing a new Edith Nourse Rogers Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Scholarship in her honor. This GI Bill provision allocated up to an additional \$30,000 per student for STEM fields, recognizing that veterans in STEM often exhausted their GI Bill benefits before completing their education and training. Consistent with her legacy of advocating for veterans' health and education, this new GI Bill provision applies to undergraduate STEM degree programs and "covered clinical training programs for healthcare professionals" who have earned a graduate degree.¹⁰ This legislation was passed into law in part because of increasing tuition and increased years of training associated with STEM professions, including medicine. From the time of Congresswoman Rogers' passing

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in 1960 to the introduction of the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship in 2018, medical school tuition and fees increased 750% to approximately \$300,000 per student.¹¹

The Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship has the potential to increase veterans' access to higher education in medicine and STEM professions. The present study provides historical context for the scholarship's namesake, Edith Nourse Rogers, and analyzes the VA's administration of the program to ensure appropriate oversight and resource allocation. Following this brief analysis, we summarize the eligibility criteria for the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship and address recent legislative efforts to amend the program. Finally, we provide recommendations for optimizing the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship for veterans in graduate degree programs and healthcare professions.

While these policies apply broadly to all military veterans using the Post 9/11 GI Bill, there are a number of STEM programs that present unique opportunities for the Special Operations community. For physicians-in-training, there is West Virginia University School of Medicine's Special Operations Medic Pipeline (SOM-P) program and the Zucker School of Medicine at Hofstra/Northwell's linkage program for Special Operations personnel. University of North Carolina's physician assistant program similarly grants admissions preference to Special Operations medics and veterans who served in a medical capacity. The relevance of the Edith Nourse STEM Scholarship for the Special Operations community is further heightened following the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act, which approved a pilot program for Special Operations medics to earn credit toward a physician assistant master's degree through their prior military service.¹²

Methods

Congressional and VA archival documents were reviewed to describe Edith Nourse Rogers' contribution to the history of veterans' healthcare and medical education. Relevant legislation, including the *Supporting Veterans in STEM Careers Act* signed into law in February 2020, was also analyzed in developing the recommendations of this Editorial.¹³ The present study also investigated the first two years of the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship via a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request. The FOIA request solicited data concerning the number of applications, budget and money allocated to the program by fiscal year.

Results

In fiscal year (FY) 2019, 599 of 1,337 applications (44.8%) for the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship were denied by the VA. Similarly, in FY2020, 5,655 of 8,102 (69.8%) of applications were denied. According to the legislation, up to \$25 million was appropriated for use by veterans in FY2019 and up to \$75 million was budgeted for in FY2020. However, in response to the FOIA, no money (\$0, or 0% of \$25 million budget) was sent to veterans in FY2019 and \$18.4 million (24.5% of \$75 million budget) was sent to veterans in FY2020.

Discussion

Edith Nourse Rogers is a historic figure for women in the military, veterans' education, and veterans' healthcare in the

United States. Her legacy is carried forward in the Forever GI Bill with the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship, which became operational on August 1, 2019. Our study revealed that the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM scholarship has had an alarmingly high rejection rate and low tuition reimbursement rate in the first 2 years since its inception. These findings are concerning and suggest the need for additional scrutiny and oversight, as well as a review of eligibility guidelines.

Specifically, there is likely confusion among veterans in healthcare professional degree programs regarding the scholarship's coverage of clinical training. The legislation has two stipulations that limit military veterans' eligibility and warrant additional discussion: 1) to be eligible, veteran healthcare professionals must have already earned their respective graduate degree, and 2) they must be in "clinical training required by a health care professional to be licensed to practice in a State or locality."¹⁴ For veteran physicians-in-training, these eligibility criteria mean that clinical rotations during medical school, the most costly portion of training, do not qualify for the scholarship. However, medical residencies (after medical degree conferment) are eligible. Similar distinctions can be made for graduate education and postgraduate clinical training for veteran nurses, physician assistants, and other healthcare professionals.

The 2020 STEM Designated Degree Program List with the list of eligible US Department of Education's Classification of Instructional Programs substantiates this interpretation of the law.¹⁵ The STEM Designated Degree Program List, however, is somewhat of a misnomer, as the *degree program* must be complete before veterans' eligibility can begin. Once approved for the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM scholarship, veterans are eligible for up to nine months of additional GI Bill funding or up to a \$30,000 stipend, whichever is of lesser value.¹⁴ As a result, military veterans who exhaust GI Bill benefits during undergraduate premedical education will have gaps in GI Bill support during graduate school only to become eligible during postgraduate clinical training. This is counterintuitive, as postgraduate clinical training programs are (nearly universally) salaried positions, whereas graduate degrees involve paying tuition.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Ahead of her time, Edith Nourse Rogers advanced causes for women and veterans, and the STEM provision of the Forever GI Bill named in her honor reflects her lasting impact on US medical education. Further investigation into the VA's high rate of denied applications is needed, as the scholarship is currently not living up to the vision and legacy of its namesake.

The current eligibility requirements limit the utility of the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM scholarship for healthcare professionals. In its current form, it is not designed as an educational scholarship for healthcare professionals but rather as a stipend for postgraduate training. This is putting the cart before the horse, as support is needed most during graduate education, not after. The authors encourage Congress and the VA to review eligibility requirements and expand support to student veterans who are in good standing in full-time graduate STEM degree programs, including healthcare professionals.

This recommendation to expand eligibility is consistent with the strategic plan published by the Interagency Working Group on

Veterans and Military Spouses in STEM in December 2021.¹⁶ This working group received its mandate from the *Supporting Veterans in STEM Careers Act* signed into law the previous year, and we encourage the expansion of this existing program to meet the needs of veterans in healthcare.

Conflicts of Interest

None.

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