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THE REGISTER CITIZEN

MARKET MATTERS: Returning veterans have special financial needs



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Let's think back to how we spent Memorial Day a year ago. We may have seen a parade or purchased a poppy at our local supermarket entrance. Perhaps we honored those who

died ensuring our freedoms with heartfelt prayers and memories, saluted our flag, and paused for a moment of reflection. With just another week until Memorial Day this year, it is a good time to think about how we will remember the Americans who have served our country.

As we honor those who have pledged to protect our freedoms, we also should take note of the many sacrifices made by our men and women in uniform and the challenges they face upon returning home, including financial challenges.

Much of the focus of veteran-related readjustment programs is on physical and mental health. That is critical, of course. The current administration has proposed a 6 percent hike to The Department of Veterans Affairs, offering the VA a potential \$4.4 billion increase in funding, which could go a long way in helping to boost some of those programs. However, I believe that it also is important to provide financial counseling assistance to those who are about to deploy or are returning from overseas.

From the Revolutionary War to the present, many veterans have returned home to find that their service has resulted in financial difficulties. Even those who had their expenses under control prior to activation and deployment may discover that the loss of a wage earner's civilian-life pay can seriously undermine their overall financial health — and potentially that of their family.

While many service organizations can help navigate the complex veterans' benefits procedures, including qualifications for many financial benefits, I have found little in the way of specific counseling for personal finance issues such as staying out of debt, or resolving debt issues upon return from deployment.

There are, however, some tips and resources that can help veterans better prepare and manage their finances. For example, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau has resources for service members that explain their rights under the Military Lending Act.

It is also advisable to create a realistic budget to make sure you are aware of how much money will be needed after separation from the military, and to ensure that credit scores are in good shape should it be necessary to make use of credit or loans upon returning.

Another tip is to avoid splurging. Upon returning home following a deployment, veterans can face the urge to splurge on a big purchase, such as a house, car or vacation. By waiting for the initial emotions of being home to settle, more rational financial decisions that are in line with a financial plan can be made.

Managing investments, paying bills in a timely manner and regularly adding to savings can be difficult while deployed. Enlisting the aid of a trusted friend or family member may be a good solution. Having someone to monitor credit cards and bills to ensure there is nothing unusual can help ensure finances stay on track.

Taxes can also be an issue for a returning veteran. A tax professional with expertise in military transition issues has the potential to make a world of difference. It also may be advisable to review existing life-insurance policies to determine whether they are adequate for the near and long-term.

Many organizations offer emergency financial assistance. In addition, many can help returning veterans determine exactly what benefits are available to them upon their return to civilian life, and some of those benefits may be financial, especially for the wounded and disabled. It is important to leverage resources available to ensure proper management of those benefits.

Marking next weekend with a backyard barbecue or pool party might be a nice way to celebrate the unofficial start of the summer season. But focusing on the real-world needs of our veterans could be a better way to memorialize those who paid for our freedoms with their lives.

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