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The new GI Bill that President Bush signed into law Monday will help a wider range of military veterans and boost local economies, its primary House sponsor says.

U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Ariz., said Monday that the expanded funding for veterans' college educations will have an impact beyond the veterans themselves.

"It also is a good stimulus bill because it is money being spent right here," said Mitchell, whose East Valley district includes Arizona State University in Tempe. "And it goes into effect immediately."

Unlike previous GI Bills, which covered only active members of the military, the new one also covers members of the National Guard and reservists. All must have served on active duty since Sept. 11, 2001.

Mitchell estimates that 1.5 million veterans qualify for the new benefits, but how many will use them is unknown. The new law also allows veterans to transfer their benefits to a spouse or children.

More than half of World War II veterans, or 7.8 million of the total 15 million veterans, went to school on the original GI Bill.

The new version provides four years of tuition at in-state public institutions, housing stipends, books and fees for those who serve at least three years. Those with shorter enlistments will receive a percentage of benefits.

The biggest hurdle to the bill's passage was deciding how to pay for it, Mitchell said. He argued that benefits for combat veterans are a cost of war, and the bill was ultimately included in the \$162 billion funding measure for fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Mitchell, who first won election to Congress in 2006 and is up for re-election Nov. 4, called the new GI Bill probably the most important legislation he has worked on. "This is the main victory," he said. "I feel very good about this."