

Marketplace

Wednesday, February 18, 2009

Injured veterans fight for benefits

Injured soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan continue to fight long after they've returned home. But it's not enemy fire they're facing, it's the complicated process of claiming disability benefits. Jeff Tyler reports.

TEXT OF STORY

BOB MOON: More than seven years into the war in Afghanistan, reinforcements are on the way. Another 17,000 troops are being sent in -- as Commander-in-Chief Obama explains it -- to "stabilize a deteriorating situation."

Already, beyond the cost in lives and money, there are monumental funding issues, caring for the severely wounded from both Iraq and Afghanistan. Not to mention: systemic problems within the military and the Veterans Administration, which can sometimes prevent disabled vets from collecting the benefits they're owed.

As Marketplace's Jeff Tyler reports, wounded soldiers are often finding they've traded one battlefield for another.

JEFF TYLER: Forty-two-year-old Dell McLeod has trouble with his memory. But he knows precisely how long he was in the military.

DELL MCLEOD: I pulled three years, ten months and three days of regular army.

In 2005, he was badly hurt in Kuwait. The driver of his supply truck didn't secure the cargo door and it came crashing down on Dell.

MCLEOD: I was airborne. I fell. And I was like a pretzel when I hit the ground. I



Dell and Annette McLeod outside of the VA in Columbia, S.C. (Jeff Tyler)

was unconscious. I sustained a brain injury. Back injury. Goin' cripple in my right leg.

While he was recovering at Walter Reed army hospital, his wife Annette spent two years battling the army over Dell's disability benefits. During lunch at a BBQ restaurant in Columbia, South Carolina, Annette says the army dragged its feet when it came to diagnosing Dell's brain injury, a delay she believes cost them tens of thousands of dollars.

ANNETTE MCLEOD: Because he did not get a traumatic brain injury diagnosis in 90 days, he did not qualify for the Traumatic Servicemen's Group Life Insurance -- that was up to a \$100,000.

Some veterans advocates say the military has been systematically short-changing service members on disability benefits.

Soldiers given a military disability rating below 30 percent get a one-time severance payment instead of life-long medical benefits for the whole family.

Kerry Baker -- with the Disabled American Veterans -- says the army cherry-picks lesser injuries when applying its disability standards. In military-speak, disabilities are referred to as "unfitting conditions." That's any injury that prevents soldiers from performing their duties.

KERRY BAKER: The military may choose the ankle injury as the unfitting condition and give them ten percent. And then may determine that the traumatic brain injury, and the back injury, and the shell fragment wounds are not unfitting. And therefore they don't get a disability rating for those particular disabilities at all. And we see that a lot.

Why would the military do that?

BAKER: We have been of the opinion that it's monetarily based. You know, it's an effort to save money.

GEN. KEITH MEURLIN: Absolutely not.

That's Major General Keith Meurlin, acting director of the Transition Policy and Care Coordination Office at the Defense Department.

MEURLIN: There has never been a reference to cut to money off. It's, how do we make sure the veterans who have served and been injured are treated fairly and compensated fairly for what they've sacrificed.

But Meurlin acknowledges some short-comings with the process.

MEURLIN: I think there's a universal feeling that the old system that we have needs some serious modification and tweaking.

That system requires vets to have one disability evaluation while in the military. Then, once they're discharged, the evaluation process starts all over again with the Department of Veterans Affairs, the VA.

Despite repeated requests, the VA did not make someone available for an interview. The VA has been criticized for not moving quickly enough to handle the surge in new veterans. The backlog for disability claims is in the hundreds of thousands. The VA has been hiring more staff to help cope with the increased demand. But processing a disability claim remains daunting.

PAUL RIECKHOFF: The burden of proof is always on that veteran.

Paul Rieckhoff is executive director of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. He says appealing a disability claim can take years and many vets just can't afford to wait

that long.

RIECKHOFF: When you're trying to put food on your table and you may be working two jobs and you're dealing with an injury, veterans often take what they can get now, rather than try to fight the system over time. And often times, they end up getting less of a benefit than they probably deserve.

Once benefits are finally determined, some veterans still have trouble taking advantage of them. Especially in rural America.

Dell and Annette McLeod drive over two hours -- each way -- from their hometown in rural South Carolina to the nearest VA... in Columbia.

MCLEOD: Oh, a good week, it's one day a week. On a week when we can't shift all the appointments, it's two to three times a week.

There is some progress to report. The VA and the Department of Defense have partnered on a pilot program that combines the two disability evaluations into one. Major Gen. Meurlin says the new system is twice as fast and generates higher payments for disabled vets. The Pentagon will expand the program to more locations this summer.

In Columbia, S.C., I'm Jeff Tyler for Marketplace.

COMMENTS

By [barry morse](#)
From [hallandale, FL](#), 02/19/2009

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RE: TBI
U.S. Department of Defense
Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs)
DCOEoutreach@us.imshealth.com

Thank You, Barry. I looked at the site and even did a trial run. I will email this information to our Health Resource Consultants and put it in our knowledge base for future inquiries.

Respectfully,
Erin

We believe that similar cognitive reactions can be made by most individuals. We find great joy and much anecdotal evidence from almost every letter from our

users, in their many varied fields and challenges, and we are constantly inspired by their most excited and marvelous communications.

By Douglas Arnold
From Mansfield, MA, 02/18/2009

I thought it was seriously disrespectful to interrupt the seriousness of the Dell McLeod's injuries with the segue, "But first, let's do the numbers..."

In my opinion, that was just awful. I pray that Dell and Annette were not listening to the broadcast.

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