

Young, older vets fight for VA funds

BY RICHARD SISK
DAILY NEWS WASHINGTON BUREAU

Sunday, October 21st 2007, 4:00 AM

WASHINGTON - It's the fight nobody wanted - older vets competing with wounded troops from Iraq for scarce funding and hospital beds, with Bob Dole as referee.

The battle lines began forming last week at a Senate Veteran Affairs Committee hearing on revamping the overloaded military and Veterans Administration health care and disability payment systems.

"There's been some pushback," Dole said, from World War II, Korea and Vietnam vets to the reforms touted by the presidential commission he headed with former Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala.

"We front-loaded the recommendations" to focus on troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, said Dole, the former Senate Republican leader and presidential nominee.

"There's always the fear that somebody will lose something" when change comes, said Dole, a longtime advocate of VA reform who was severely wounded as a World War II Army lieutenant in Italy.

The fear for older vets is that the younger generation would go to the head of the line in the VA, where waits for appointments at regional offices can stretch to 177 days.

Another concern was with the recommendation for "quality of life" compensation that could lead to younger vets getting more money for disability payments.

"What we see is people trying to create a two-tier system, one for veterans of the global war on terror and one for everybody else," said Dave Gorman, executive director of the 1.5 million-member Disabled American Veterans.

Gorman, who lost both legs as an Army private in Vietnam, posed the question that Congress will have to answer as it decides on VA funding: "Why should a 21-year-old have priority over an 85-year-old veteran?"

Younger vets are also upset at the possibility of facing off against vets of wars past for money and hospital space.

"We shouldn't be fighting each other for priority," said Paul Rieckhoff, head of the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America.

Rieckhoff called for boosting the proposed VA budget, now about \$80 billion, to accommodate all the generations.

But the 84-year-old Dole suggested that older vets might have to settle for less.

"I never thought I got enough money," Dole said, and if younger vets "do a little better than we did, that's okay. That's good, it shows we're making progress."

rsisk@nydailynews.com