



IRAQ *and* AFGHANISTAN VETERANS *of* AMERICA

Red Tape

Veterans Fight New Battles for Care and Benefits

February 2010

More than 35,000 troops have been wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹ Hundreds of thousands of others have suffered injuries not recorded in the official military tally. Many of these new veterans and their families are shouldering an unacceptable burden: recovering from their injuries while navigating antiquated and deeply-flawed military and veterans' health care and disability systems. As a result, these wounded troops and veterans are forced to wait months, and sometimes years, for the care and disability compensation they deserve.

- **Despite the superior care offered by the Department of Defense (DOD), some of the most seriously wounded troops are still experiencing substantial delays in care.**
 - Billions have been invested in several different DOD digital patient tracking systems, and squabbling within the Defense Department over which of the digital tracking systems to use has kept any system from being fully deployed.²
 - Some wounded warriors have lingered for months and sometimes years on “Medical Hold” status without direction on their recovery and care plan or the future of their military service.³
 - Despite the introduction of Warrior Transition Units to address the administration needs of wounded soldiers, troops are still waiting 2 months to a year before they are medically discharged or returned to active-duty—about two or three times longer than the Army’s goal.⁴
- **Navigating the military’s disability system can be an arduous process, and the current system is not operating in a “timely and consistent” manner as required.**
 - The military also generally only rates one condition when deciding a servicemember’s disability, and in some cases, it has not been the most disabling condition that gets rated. For example, one Army sergeant was unable to continue serving because of a degenerative eye disease, but was rated 10 percent disabled for his shin splints.⁵
 - Disability payments for Marines and soldiers lag behind payments to sailors and airmen, despite higher injury rates.⁶
- **Advocates have long suspected that the military might be taking advantage of troops’ confusion regarding the disability process to give servicemembers lower rates of compensation.**

- 27 percent of Army personnel found medically unfit for duty between 2000 and 2006 were assigned 0 percent disability ratings, in contrast to 3 percent of sailors and 4 percent of Marines and Airmen.⁷ Overall, 13,646 soldiers were found too disabled for military service, but not disabled enough to receive any military disability benefits.
 - The rate of approval for reservists' permanent retirement disability claims has decreased from 16 percent in 2001 to just 5 percent in 2005.⁸
 - Between 2001 and 2007, 22,500 troops were discharged from the military with a 'personality disorder'.⁹ Personality disorder discharges have also increased by 40 percent in the Army since the invasion of Iraq.¹⁰
- **In addition to the problems *within* the DOD and VA health care and benefits systems, there are also problems with the transition *between* the two systems, including lost paperwork, a drop-off in the quality of care, and the lack of coordination between two distinct disability rating processes.**
 - **At the VA, medically-retired troops, now "veterans," join the millions of other veterans who seek VA care and benefits in the months or years after their military service. The pressing problem with the VA is not the quality of care, but a lack of access to the system, often leading to long waits for care.**
 - The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) operates 153 veterans' hospitals nationwide, as well as hundreds of community clinics and Vet Centers,¹¹ and has nearly 8 million veterans enrolled in its health care system. It sees about 6 million patients annually, including more than 419,000 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan.¹²
 - 8 percent of patients—or 480,000 veterans—are still waiting more than 30 days for their desired appointment.¹³ Moreover, the VA Office of the Inspector General suggests that wait times may be even longer than the VA admits.¹⁴
 - Outpatients rating VA health care service as very good or excellent has dropped dramatically in the last year, from 78 percent in FY2008 to 56 percent in FY2009.¹⁵
 - About 3 million veterans, or 37.8 percent of veterans enrolled in the VA system, lived in rural areas.¹⁶ As of 2003, "more than 25 percent of veterans enrolled in VA health care—over 1.7 million—live over 60 minutes driving time from a VA hospital."¹⁷
 - **Veterans filing claims for VA disability compensation are also facing extensive backlogs, and the system is excessively complicated to navigate.**
 - As of January 2010, there were 423,202 compensation claims pending, and the VA benefits backlog as a whole was nearing 1 million claims.¹⁸
 - As of May 2009, almost 314,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are receiving disability compensation.¹⁹ In 2007, before the recent increase of troops in Afghanistan, it was

predicted that the VA “will see 638,000 new first-time claims in the next five years due to the Iraq war.”²⁰

- In 2009, the VA processed a disability claim at an average of 179 days, almost two months longer the stated VA’s goal of 125 days.²¹
 - Even with the hiring of almost 4,000 new claims processors, the VA expects productivity will decline due to the challenges of training and integrating new staff.²²
 - Widespread inconsistencies in VA claims decisions are a major problem. For example, average annual disability payments are \$7,556 in Ohio but \$12,395 in New Mexico.²³ Wounded veterans approaching the VA without professional assistance receive less than half the compensation awarded to those who are represented by a lawyer or service organization.²⁴
 - The VA’s inaccuracy is a huge source of the claims backlog. According to the VA’s own numbers, 17 percent of ratings decisions are not accurate.²⁵ If the VA were to process the 1 million claims backlog right now, 170,000 of those claims would be inaccurate.
 - Injured veterans who contest a wrong decision face a drawn-out appeals process, which takes, on average, a staggering 639 days.²⁶
- **The DOD and VA have taken some solid steps to reduce the red tape that wounded troops and veterans face, including a Joint Disability Evaluation System, but have stopped short of comprehensive change. In 2010, IAVA is calling on the Administration and Congress to reform the VA claims processing system. Veterans of all generations deserve a modern disability system that digitizes records, holds processors accountable for the accuracy of their work, and removes unnecessary steps in the evaluation process.**

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- ⁸ Kelly Kennedy, "Wounded and Waiting," *Army Times*, February 20, 2007: <http://www.armytimes.com/news/2007/02/tnsmmedboards070217/>.
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- ¹⁵ Inpatient satisfaction rates have also dropped tremendously, from 79 percent in FY2008 to 62 percent in FY2009. The FY2009 numbers are partial or estimated data from the VA, final data will be published in the FY2011 Congressional Budget. VA Performance and Accountability Report, FY 2009, p. II-145.
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²⁶ Ibid. p.10