

Bush administration retreats from probe of veterans' benefits

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The Department of Veterans Affairs announced on Thursday, a day before the Veterans Day holiday, that it would cancel a review of 72,000 approved claims filed by veterans suffering 100 percent disability as a result of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Veterans Affairs Secretary R. James Nicholson said in a statement that earlier fraud allegations were actually clerical errors on the part of the VA.

The legitimacy of some of the claims, filed between 1994 and 2004, for which veterans with PTSD receive \$2,299 a month, had been questioned by the acting VA inspector general, Jon A. Wooditch, in October, prompting Nicholson to order the review.

One beneficiary, Greg Morris, 57, of Chama, New Mexico committed suicide in October when the local VA office prematurely sent out a letter notifying him of the review. He had told a veterans services officer that he was afraid of losing his benefits.

Under the guidelines of the review, a veteran had to prove that his or her condition directly resulted from a single "stressor," a specific incident that was enough to cause the disorder.

The VA annually spends \$3.4 billion on PTSD cases. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder "is a psychiatric disorder that can occur following the experience or witnessing of life-threatening events," according to the web site of the National Center for PTSD. "People who suffer from PTSD often relive the experience through nightmares and flashbacks, have difficulty sleeping, and feel detached or estranged, and these symptoms can be severe enough and last long enough to significantly impair the person's daily life."

The VA had not only ordered a review of the existing PTSD disability recipients, but established tougher guidelines for new applicants for the benefits.

A burgeoning number of new PTSD cases from the

wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have caused an 80 percent increase in VA compensation over the last several years. The costs of compensation for all other types of injuries have increased by 12 percent.

A 2004 study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that soldiers who returned from Iraq had experienced an average of two firefights for each tour of duty. Fifty-six percent of the soldiers had killed an enemy combatant; 28 percent had killed a civilian; 68 percent had witnessed the death or wounding of another soldier; and 51 percent reported seeing human remains.

The National Center for PTSD also notes a set of "unique stressors" for American soldiers in the Iraq war such as "ambiguous and unknown civilian threats. In this context there is no safe place and no safe role. Soldiers are required to maintain an unprecedented degree of vigilance..."

The NEJM report notes that nearly 20 percent of soldiers returning from Iraq have PTSD. Research from the Gulf War shows that the prevalence of PTSD can rise during the first two years after combat.

The VA is retreating because of widespread opposition to the review from veterans' groups. All indications are, however, that this is temporary. The Bush administration and Congress have set the stage for broader cuts in the VA compensation programs. In March 2003, Congress considered cutting \$25 billion from the VA budget over the next 10 years.

In September 2003, after the defeat of a defense authorization bill that would have restricted benefits to veterans, the House Armed Services Committee established a commission to investigate the rationale for veterans' disability benefits. In 2004, Congress mandated the Defense Department to study disability benefits for veterans.

The House Veterans Affairs Committee has also announced that veterans organizations will no longer be permitted to present testimony at joint House and Senate veterans committee hearings, a practice that has been routine for several decades.

This summer, the VA's undersecretary for benefits, Daniel L. Cooper, called for a major restructuring of the VA's disability benefit system, noting that the General Accountability Office and the Office of Management and Budget have "stated publicly that the program has not evolved with changes in our economy, workforce, or with medical terminology."

Cooper also implied veterans were cheating the system when he cited the increased numbers of veterans receiving compensation (many of them from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars) and said, "There are catalysts that increase the advantage of receiving disability compensation. Entitlement to the VA's disability compensation can lead to eligibility for other programs, including VA medical care, vocational rehabilitation, dependents' educational assistance as well as state and local benefits." The lie of the cheating welfare mother helped Bill Clinton destroy welfare. Now the Bush administration is spinning the image of the "welfare vet."

In general, a state of crisis already pervades the VA. Benefits have not kept pace with the cost of living, and VA facilities in many areas of the country have had to stop hiring doctors and nurses or close medical facilities altogether.

These policies are an assault on all veterans, but it is not a coincidence that the first targeted have been the many servicemen and women seeking treatment from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of atrocities they have witnessed or committed in Iraq. It is in the interests of the Bush administration that these people be excluded from any sort of official existence, whether in hospitals or on government disability payrolls.



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