



Veterans Affairs Wants To Be Advocate, Not Enemy

Written On June 21, 2010 By [Bob Kraft](#)

The Veterans Affairs Department's disability claims process can be a nightmare to negotiate, and in my opinion is a real insult to the men and women who have been injured in serving our country. There may be some hope for improvement though. I've noted previously that the application form has been reduced to a mere six pages. Now VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki says the agency is going to become an advocate for veterans, rather than an obstacle. The goal is to eliminate the huge backlog of disability claims by 2015 and move to an electronic data system.

This proposed change was written about in an article in the Los Angeles Times recently. Here are excerpts:

After Clay Hunt was shot through the wrist by a sniper in Iraq, the VA misplaced his disability paperwork for four months. Then he was required to visit a series of doctors to verify the extent of his wounds.

Many veterans wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan are being buffeted by a VA disability system clogged by delays, lost paperwork, redundant exams, denials of claims and inconsistent diagnoses. Some describe an absurd situation in which they are required to

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prove that their conditions are serious enough for higher payments, yet are forced to wait months for decisions.

“You fight for your country, then come home and have to fight against your own country for the benefits you were promised,” said Hunt, 28, who served in Iraq and Afghanistan as a Marine Corps sniper.

It took Hunt, who lives in Brentwood, 10 months to receive VA disability payments for his injuries after the agency misplaced his paperwork.

The VA, which still relies on a mostly paper-based system for disability claims, is overwhelmed by a flood of wounded veterans from the long Afghan and Iraq wars. That’s in addition to the Vietnam War, Korean War and even World War II veterans.

Some veterans wait up to six months to get their initial VA medical appointment. The typical veteran of the Iraq or Afghanistan wars waits 110 days for a disability claim to be processed, with a few waiting up to a year. For all veterans, the average wait is 161 days.

The VA says a ruling on an appeal of a disability rating takes more than 600 days on average. The Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, or IAVA, an advocacy group, says the average delay is 776 days.

Up to 17% of veterans’ disability ratings are incorrect, the VA says. Thousands of dollars in disability payments hinge on the ratings, which are determined by the VA. The agency says it hopes to eventually cut the error rate to 2%.

With the VA deluged with 90,000 new claims a month, the backlog has reached 175,000. The VA defines a backlogged case as one that takes more than 125 days to process.

“It makes veterans feel like they’re fighting VA paperwork instead of the enemy,” said Paul Rieckhoff, an Iraq veteran and executive director of IAVA, which has praised the quality of VA medical care but has criticized the claims process.

By 2012, the agency plans to move away from paper-based claims to an electronic data system. The VA has provided some veterans with advocates to guide them through what Walcoff concedes can be “a confusing, difficult process.”

The Obama administration has proposed a 27% increase in the VA’s budget for next year. The agency has hired 4,200 employees since 2007 to tackle the backlog and has increased overtime.

Even with reforms, negotiating the disability system can be a maddening slog. Many veterans complain that the burden is on them to prove the severity of their wounds and also verify that they were injured during their service.

Often in severe pain or suffering psychological distress, many wounded veterans are overwhelmed by the task.

In Los Angeles, Hunt said he spent weeks visiting various doctors and putting together the 200-page packet of medical records that the VA later misplaced.

“I can track my pizza from Pizza Hut on my BlackBerry, but the VA can’t find my claim for four months,” he said.

Now he has developed memory loss, panic attacks and other symptoms of possible traumatic brain injury, he said. He is deciding whether to apply for increased benefits and dive once again into the VA bureaucracy.

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When he volunteered for the Marine Corps, Hunt recalled, a selling point was lifelong medical care if he were wounded.

“But then the time comes to get those benefits, it turns into a lifelong battle with the VA to get what you were promised,” he said.