1. Access to Benefits/Care

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Hyperlink to Above Story

1.3 - Pittsburgh Post-Gazette: Leaders of Pittsburgh VA say water system safe from Legionnaires' (Mar 20, Sean D. Hamill, 174k; Pittsburgh, PA)
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2. Ending Homeless Veterans

2.1 – The Huffington Post: Solving veteran homelessness in the U.S. (Mar 20, Jean-Michel Giraud, 41M/mo; New York, NY)
In the last few years, the Department of Veterans Affairs has revolutionized its service delivery, partnering with homeless services organizations like Friendship Place, in an unprecedented effort to solve veteran homelessness in the nation.

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So Goodwin took the homeless shuttle to a new shelter every night. “There were fights over space. It was horrible. The best thing about having served in the Army and the war was that it prepared me for the homeless war back home. This time I was really fighting a daily war to protect my daughter.”

Hyperlink to Above Story

3. Ending the Claims Backlog

3.1 - MSNBC (Video): *The Rachel Maddow Show* (Mar 20, 1M; New York, NY)
Rachel Maddow discusses backlog of Veterans benefits.

Hyperlink to Above Story

3.2 - USA Today (Military Times): *Veterans Affairs official asks for patience on claims* (Mar 20, Rick Maze, 1.7M; McLean, VA)
An embattled Veterans Affairs Department official responsible for the growing mountain of benefits claims pleaded Wednesday for more time to show success in getting them processed.

Hyperlink to Above Story

3.3 – CNN (Video): *Veterans waiting years for benefits* (Mar 20, Jake Tapper, 451k New York, NY)
Jake Tapper investigates claims of a growing backlog for veteran health benefits since President Obama took office.

Hyperlink to Above Story

3.4 - Chicago Tribune: *VA trying to move faster on benefits claims* (Mar 20, Paul Muschick, 412k; Chicago, IL)
While much of America went digital years ago, the Department of Veterans Affairs is just now deploying a paperless claims system to speed up the processing of soldiers’ requests for disability benefits. As of last month it was being used in 18 regional claims processing offices with plans to expand it to 38 others, including Philadelphia, sometime this year.

Hyperlink to Above Story

3.5 - Washington Examiner: *Lawmakers scoff as VA exec claims progress on vets benefit claims* (Mar 20, Mark Flatten, 292k)
A top Department of Veterans Affairs official said today that recent reforms have led to dramatic increases in speed and accuracy in processing disability claims, an assertion that was quickly challenged by skeptical congressional overseers and the agency’s own numbers.

Hyperlink to Above Story
3.6 – The Daily Journal: **Iraq Invasion – Ten years later: Veterans who served now wait for services** (Mar 20, Heather Murtagh, 46k; San Mateo, CA)

The Oakland U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs office has a backlog of more than 25,700 claims. For many veterans, it can take one to two years to get access to needed and deserved services — a problem local elected officials and veterans say must be fixed.

[Hyperlink to Above Story]

3.7 – The Daily Beast: **Head of V.A. Benefits to Testify for Her Job** (Mar 20, Bob Brewin, 2.2M/mo; Washington, DC)

Rep. Jeff Miller (R-FL), chairman of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, thinks it’s time for a shake-up within Veterans Affairs. Specifically, he wants Allison Hickey, the VA’s undersecretary for benefits, to resign.

[Hyperlink to Above Story]

3.8 - KNTV-TV: **House Committee Leader Calls for Head of VA Benefits to Resign** (Mar 20, Aaron Glantz, 241k/mo; San Jose, CA)

Concerned about broken promises of assistance for the nation’s veterans, Rep. Jeff Miller, chairman of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, called on Tuesday for the head of the agency’s benefits administration to resign.

[Hyperlink to Above Story]

3.9– KWWL-TV (Video): **Thousands of Iowa veterans in compensation claim backlog** (Mar 20, Becca Habegger, 203k/mo; Dubuque, IA)

More than 6,000 Iowa veterans are waiting on claims they’ve filed with the US Department of Veterans Affairs.

[Hyperlink to Above Story]

3.10 – NextGov: **House Lawmaker Wants VA Benefits Chief To Resign** (Mar 20, Bob Brewin, 21k/mo; Washington, DC)

Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., chairman of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, called on Allison Hickey, the Veterans Affairs Department’s undersecretary for benefits, to resign due to the growing backlog of disability claims.

[Hyperlink to Above Story]

3.11 – C-SPAN3 (Video): **Head of V.A. Benefits to Testify for Her Job** (Mar 20, Washington, DC)

Joe Kline’s piece for "time" magazine ten years after a national disgrace talking about the plight of veterans coming back from the wars and in Iraq and Afghanistan.

[Hyperlink to Above Story]

4. **Veteran Opportunities for Education/GI Bill**
4.1 – The Boston Globe (AP): **RI lawmakers want college aid for veterans** (Mar 20, 230k; Boston, MA)
The independent governor and several lawmakers plan to highlight several legislative proposals to help veterans at a Statehouse news conference Wednesday.

[Hyperlink to Above Story]

4.2 - Army Times: **Senate votes to restore tuition assistance** (Mar 20, Rick Maze, 264k/wk; Springfield, VA)
The Senate voted Wednesday to restore tuition assistance for all services, reversing a budget-cutting move ordered by the Army, Air Force, Marine Corps and Coast Guard.

[Hyperlink to Above Story]

5. **Women Veterans** – No Coverage

6. **Sequestration** – No Coverage

7. **Other**

7.1 – The Wall Street Journal: **Veterans Face Elevated Unemployment Rates** (Mar 20, Ben Casselman, 1.6M; New York, NY)
A decade after the launch of the war in Iraq, one troubling legacy is clear: persistently high unemployment among veterans.

[Hyperlink to Above Story]

7.2 – The Wall Street Journal: **NY would give tax credits to hire recent veterans** (Mar 20, 1.6M; New York, NY)
The state Senate’s Independent Democratic Conference says the state budget will include five-figure tax credits to employers to hire recent veterans as a way to reduce the high unemployment rate of service members returning from combat.

[Hyperlink to Above Story]

7.3 – CBS News (AP): **Report: Jobs picture for veterans improved in 2012** (Mar 20, 7.4M/mo; New York, NY)
The jobs picture for the nation's veterans improved significantly last year, particularly for those who have served since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the Labor Department said Wednesday.

[Hyperlink to Above Story]

7.4 - Baltimore Sun: **Md. veterans official accused in benefits kickback scheme** (Mar 20, Ian Duncan, 180k; Baltimore, MD)
A former high-ranking official at the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs has been accused of running a kickback scheme from his state office, allegedly fabricating military achievements and disability claims in exchange for a cut of the resulting government payouts.

[Hyperlink to Above Story]
7.5 – CNN Money: Veteran unemployment dropped to 9.9% in 2012 (Mar 20, Aaron Smith, 1.9M/mo; New York, NY)
The unemployment rate for veterans dropped last year, according to a report out Wednesday from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, but vets still lag behind non-vets in the job market.

7.6 – Knoxville News Sentinel: Iraq veterans struggle with unemployment (Mar 20, Fred Brown, 75k; Knoxville, TN)
The VA report shows that 18 percent of the veterans who were in Iraq are currently unemployed. And of that number about 25 percent earn less than $21,840 a year.

7.7 – Stars and Stripes: Veterans’ advocates lobby hard for attention on Capitol Hill (Mar 20, Leo Shane, 70k; Washington, DC)
Nearly every major veterans advocacy organization has visited Capitol Hill over the last month, pushing lawmakers to keep the focus on their issues amid the financial fights in Congress.

7.8 – Army Times: Gov’t work boosts younger vets’ employment (Mar 20, Rick Maze, 264k/wk; Springfield, VA)
One in four Iraq and Afghanistan-era veterans have government jobs, primarily with the federal government, says a new Labor Department report that finds an improved employment picture for the post-9/11 generation.

VA's programs for preferentially awarding contracts to veteran-owned small businesses are unlike those of any other agency in government. In a 2006 law, Congress told VA to take a "veterans first" approach to procurement, making service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses its first choice for any given contract and all other veteran-owned small businesses its second choice.
1. Access to Benefits/Care

1.1 - CBS Evening News: Wounded Iraq veteran gets by -- With a little help from friends
(Mar 20, David Martin; New York, NY)

VIDEO

Ten years ago Wednesday, U.S. ground forces began pouring into Iraq.

By the time the war was over, more than 4000 Americans had been killed and 32,000 others were wounded.

But for some veterans, there are new battles.

Eddie Wright's wife Cody has to help him tuck in his shirt before he gets his picture taken because he lost both his hands to a rocket-propelled grenade in Iraq in 2004.

"At first I looked at my hands and I said, 'Damn, both of them,'" Wright said.

Wright spent a year-and-a-half at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, much of it with his mother at his side -- an expense the family couldn't afford.

In 2005, a charity called Semper Fi Fund presented him with a check to shore up his finances.

Wright became the first double amputee to return to active duty in the Marine Corps, teaching martial arts.

"I didn't want to be a charity case. You know. I wanted to actually be a productive marine," he said in 2005.

He still says he doesn't want to be a charity case.

He got on with his life -- going to school, becoming a father to three children -- but couldn't escape his terrible wounds.

"I've also had times when I needed people to step up, like the Semper Fi Fund and help me out when I was in a bind," he said.

Wright's biggest bind was in his marriage. His wife Cody had to bear the brunt of anger he couldn't control -- especially after he left the Marines.

"Of all the things the Semper Fi Fund has done the marriage counseling is the best," he said.

"What it all boiled down to . . . losing your hands, I do have a little anger and other feelings that accompany it and I do a good job concealing that underneath the surface but unfortunately I've taken it out on my wife."

Wright said he was angry because his career was cut short. "When I say I was living my dream, I really mean it," he said.
He is just one of the wounded marines helped by the Semper Fi Fund which Karen Guenther set up in May 2003, the same month President George W. Bush declared major combat in Iraq had come to an end.

Guenther said the fund had given out $72 million to almost 9000 service members.

Iraq War: Was it worth it?
U.S. troops injured in Iraq face tough homecoming
More coverage: Veterans affairs
But Karen Guenther's work is not coming to an end.

"When we started we thought, 'OK we're going to do this for a year or two'. Now ten years later we're still doing it and now I'm saying it's going to be decades."

There are no more Eddie Wrights coming home from Iraq, but the wages of war still must be paid.

1.2 - Bloomberg Businessweek: Is an Anti-Fraud Law Hampering Veteran-Owned Contractors? (Mar 20, Patrick Clark, 993k/wk; New York, NY)

Federal law sets the goal of awarding 3 percent of U.S. government contracts to businesses owned by service-disabled veterans and, in aid of that effort, allows veteran-owned businesses to apply for certification from the Department of Veterans Affairs that moves them toward the front of the line.

In 2010, amid reports that veterans were serving as straw men for businesses controlled by others, Congress passed a law requiring the VA to take greater pains to make sure that companies applying for certification are truly veteran-owned.

That much sounds fair, but according to a Bloomberg News story published today by Kathleen Miller, lawmakers and veterans’ advocates are complaining that the VA has proven too slow at evaluating applications, costing some companies millions of dollars in lost contracts and forcing them to lay off workers.

While the VA has sped up processing for first-time applicants, it is taking an average of 128 days for small firms to get final decisions on their requests for reconsideration, according to agency statistics released at a congressional hearing yesterday.

The agency has a “backlog of legitimate companies trying to get certified,” Representative Mike Coffman, a Colorado Republican, said. “While the VA’s intent may be in the right place, its regulatory actions have put many veterans at a disadvantage.”

To be clear, Miller reports that the VA has gotten faster at processing first-time applicants: The average business received the agency’s decision in 46 days in February, down from more than 130 days at some points in 2011. But lawmakers such as Coffman and advocacy groups like the American Legion want the agency to improve its turnaround time in processing appeals.
In a related vein, it’s also worth noting that the government’s goals for awarding contracts to small businesses owned by different types of entrepreneurs are rarely met, as Bloomberg News has reported before.

1.3 - Pittsburgh Post-Gazette: Leaders of Pittsburgh VA say water system safe from Legionnaires' (Mar 20, Sean D. Hamill, 174k; Pittsburgh, PA)

Last winter, after George Eason read about the Legionnaires’ disease outbreak at the Pittsburgh Veterans Affairs buildings, he canceled all of his pending appointments with his VA doctors. "I have asthma and that’s the last place I need to be," said Mr. Eason, 61, an Air Force veteran from Homewood.

Since Legionnaires’ is a form of pneumonia, he didn't feel he could risk contracting the disease. Pittsburgh VA officials had veterans like Mr. Eason in mind Wednesday when they invited a reporter to hear all that they have done to make sure its water is safe and stop the outbreak that sickened 21 patients and killed five in 2011 and 2012.

"We really do want to get the word out," Pittsburgh VA director Terry Wolf said. "We want our veterans to continue to come to us."

She made her comments during an interview with the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette that also included regional VA director Michael Moreland and Ali Sonel, Pittsburgh VA's chief of staff, in their first public comments on the outbreak.

In addition to extra testing of the water for the Legionella bacteria and additional treatment of the water with chlorine, the Pittsburgh VA is spending $10 million to install new "mixing valves" on every shower head and faucet at its hospital in Oakland and H.J. Heinz health care facility near Aspinwall. That will allow the VA to increase the water temperature to 140 degrees to help kill Legionella.

The VA is spending $750,000 to map its water system and locate and get rid of "dead legs" that can be a source of Legionella by allowing stagnant water to fester, and building a database of its faucets and shower heads to track problems by examining their Legionella growth, temperature and pH levels.

Perhaps most important, the officials said, all the extra work and testing and treatment has continued to keep the Legionella bacteria under control. There has not been a Legionnaires' case that began at a VA facility since November, Dr. Sonel said.

In a change in protocol, if a patient is suspected to have pneumonia, he or she is given not only the urinary antigen test, but a sputum (mucus) test to determine Legionnaires'. The sputum tests -- which had not been regularly performed until the outbreak occurred -- can also be used to grow a Legionella culture that can then be compared to a sample of the bacteria in the hospital's water to see if the disease was contracted in the building.
Dr. Sonel said that more than 1,000 samples have been taken from water faucets, shower heads and other areas, 2 percent of which tested positive for Legionella.

That is a safe finding in any setting, since Legionella is present in many water systems and the goal is to keep the percentage down to minimize the risk of contact.

"Everything you do to maintain Legionella is to manage risk," Mr. Moreland said. "You can't eradicate it."

Mrs. Wolf said the Pittsburgh VA is still evaluating how to treat its water. It is exploring long-term methods such as using chlorine dioxide to replace the chlorination system now in place.

But the VA probably won’t go back to the copper-silver ionization treatment system it was using when the outbreak occurred, she said. "I think we're very hesitant to go back to copper-silver because we believe it failed us," she said.

Water treatment consultants and current and former VA employees believe that the copper-silver system failed because Pittsburgh VA employees were not maintaining it properly. Dr. Sonel does not believe that.

When the CDC came to Pittsburgh in November to analyze the problem, tests found that there were proper level of copper and silver in the water and it was not killing enough of the Legionella to be safe, Dr. Sonel said.

Despite all of that, as well as several completed and ongoing investigations into the outbreak, Mrs. Wolf said: "We have not been able to definitively say what caused the outbreak. We really can't say if it was the copper-silver, new construction, or the people [at the VA]."

For now, none of that is enough for Mr. Eason, who said he would go back only "if they could get an independent source to go in there and find that everything is fine, then I'd believe it."

1.4 - WCSC-TV (Video): Service dogs trained by prisoners help wounded warriors (Mar 20, Corey Davis, 169k/mo)

VIDEO

NORTH CHARLESTON (WCSC) - Good team work takes practice. After meeting only two days ago, Air Force veteran Rick Hayes and his new service dog Malachi are getting along quite well.

Hayes said, "I figured I would come in and there's a dog trained and ready to go and I would just learn the commands and everything would be great, but it's a bigger process than that."

Hayes and Malachi are going through a week of bonding activities. Malachi grew up at the consolidated Naval Brig in North Charleston, a prison for service members who committed a crime while in the military. He now knows nearly 100 commands.
The program, Canines for Service is about 9 to 14 months long. The dogs are all rescued from the shelter. They go through personality tests and are matched with a trained prisoner who will be with the dog 24/7. It's a deal where both can get a second chance and the prisoners can give back to a veteran in need.

Rick Hairston President/CEO of Canines for Service said, "The veterans were very healthy and fit when they went off to serve our country. What we can't do is I can't replace that leg, I can't replace the burn, but if we can make their lives a little bit simpler as close to normal as their life was before they left, that would be the goal of the organization."

Malachi will help take some of the burden off Hayes' wife, who can't be home all the time.

Hayes said, "I guess the things he's going be able to help me do is going to help relieve a lot of the pain. The bending, the stooping, those type of things, they hurt."

Hayes isn't paralyzed but does rely on a wheelchair.

"It was a disc that ruptured in my back and it pinched my spinal cord but it relates back to my military service. I hurt my back while I was in the service," said Hayes.

An injury 23 years ago changed his life, now Malachi will change it again.

Hayes gets to take Malachi home this Saturday, March 23rd. A prisoner interested in the training program must have 12 to 15 months left on his or her sentence and no discipline problems within the last 6 months. Each prisoner is certified through the Department of Labor. It's the only program in the country with this certification.

All of the money needed to run the program is donated. The dogs are used for veterans not just with physical challenges, but also with mental or emotional ones like PTSD. These services are free to veterans who are approved for the program.

2. Ending Homeless Veterans

2.1 – The Huffington Post: Solving veteran homelessness in the U.S. (Mar 20, Jean-Michel Giraud, 41M/mo; New York, NY)

In the last few years, the Department of Veterans Affairs has revolutionized its service delivery, partnering with homeless services organizations like Friendship Place, in an unprecedented effort to solve veteran homelessness in the nation.

This initiative, which receives equal support from both sides of the aisle on Capitol Hill, is the result of the VA's visionary planning.

A few years ago, faced with chronic homelessness among Vietnam era veterans and the mounting pressure of returning troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, the VA sought support from the federal government to launch a multi-pronged initiative to house or re-house veterans and their families.
Working with community-based non-profit organizations, the administration, under the leadership of Secretary Shinseki, has been able to stretch the bounds of its own service constraints in an effective way. Partnering non-profits can pick up where the VA leaves off by, for instance, entering into agreements with local landlords and other service providers in a more flexible way as private entities.

Such public-private partnerships have helped propel these VA-sponsored programs to the forefront of the race to end homelessness in the US, putting it well ahead of many local jurisdictions where the response to homelessness has sometimes been impacted by policy challenges.

So, how did the VA do it?

Well, first, it took a hard look at its practices and worked to make them absolutely person-centered and outcomes-oriented. This has taken a fair amount of research. But, lo and behold, the VA is now hitting some pretty high notes on the rehabilitation stage. Rehab aficionados are finding the VA's affiliation with CARF - the champion of rehabilitation standards in the US - particularly impressive, while homeless service providers are thrilled with the VA's adoption of the Housing First model.

The vets coming through these VA-funded programs are seeing the difference. They're rapidly rebuilding their lives, and doing so with dignity - an outcome echoed throughout the various service settings involved.

From the start, the VA decided to "work smart" by offering services based on needs - no more, no less than necessary - the result being a palette of both effective and cost-effective services. I think a great example of this is the careful delineation between SSVF services and HUD-VASH permanent supportive housing. The first is intended to stabilize veterans and their households in up to 6 months by providing them with homelessness prevention services or by helping them get re-housed. Supports for these individuals and families are rebuilt through benefit applications, job placement assistance and other vital services during that period.

The program targets veteran households that are still fairly resilient but need immediate short-term assistance to resolve their housing crises. Two years into this program the VA has helped thousands of vets maintain or regain stability through these interventions. This is the fastest and cheapest way to help vets who are likely to stabilize quickly.

The second prong in the VA's approach is permanent supportive housing for veterans with greater challenges. This program offers services and long-term housing subsidies to vets who require more intensive supports. To establish this program, the VA was successful in securing assistance from Housing & Urban Development to supplement its own budget while farming out some of the work to local non-profits who provide the actual services to the veterans in order to secure specialty services like mental health services.

The partnership with VA has allowed Friendship Place to make a difference in the lives of people like Shelley Gilbert. It didn't matter that Shelley had served in the military as a member of the US Coast Guard, or that she had worked for two decades as a healthcare professional. It didn't even matter that one of her daughters and two grandkids lived with her. When she fell on hard times and wasn't able to pay rent, she was forced into a ruthless cycle of nights spent in motels, shelters and on couches. She was homeless.
When she reflects on her experience, one night in particular comes to mind. "I slept in the bus stop. It was snowing, raining, and about 25 degrees out," she says. "That was the most humbling night of my life." When Shelley found the VA's hotline number, everything changed. They connected her with Friendship Place and within 3 weeks, our staff was helping her fill out apartment applications.

Now housed and working full time, Shelley sets aside time in her busy schedule to give back. She shares her story with groups of students and volunteers at Friendship Place, delivering a message of hope and possibility. "Just don't give up," she says. Shelley's story hits home with me, and solidifies my belief that incredible accomplishments can be made when we work hard, and most important, work together.

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2.2 - New York Daily News: Forgotten valor: Once-passionate Iraq War veteran's experience with homelessness, info that led to invasion alter her perspective (Mar 20, 557k; New York, NY)

The war over there prepared her for her war back here.

“I grew up in a very dysfunctional family in Bedford-Stuyvesant,” says Nicole Goodwin, 32. “I didn’t get along with my mother. So in January of 2001 I joined the United States Army for a three-year commitment.”

Nicole said she wanted to see more of the world than the mean streets of her Brooklyn neighborhood.

“The idea of a war was an abstraction,” she says. “We were at peace. I went through boot camp and was stationed in Freiburg, Germany. I liked the Army. I liked seeing a new part of the world. It was better than what I’d left behind. But then came Sept. 11, 2001, and at age 21 my whole world changed.”

Goodwin was transferred to Fort Irwin, Calif., for additional combat training.

“I’d become pregnant from a member of my unit,” she says. “I had my baby girl, Shylah, on March 16, 2003. Most people didn’t think I would be deployed to Iraq because of my baby. But I volunteered to go. I believed in our mission. We were attacked on 9/11, and I believed Saddam Hussein was a tyrant who needed to be toppled.”

Goodwin, who had severed all ties with the baby’s father, left Shylah in the care of a female soldier in Ft. Irwin and deployed to Germany in April and then to Baghdad in July 2003 as a member of Bravo Company, 501st Forward Support Battalion.

“I was a unit supply specialist,” says Goodwin. “And I immediately began to witness the effects of the war on my fellow soldiers who were seeing heavy combat. I also saw the effects of the war on the Iraqi people. The daily weight of war takes its toll on everyone.”
She said she began to pine for her infant daughter. “Everyone around you is missing family and loved ones,” she says. “I missed Shylah. Still, I believed what I was doing I was doing for her.”

After five months in Iraq, Goodwin was sent back home in November 2003 because her three-year hitch would soon end.

“I was reunited with my daughter, and I moved back to Brooklyn,” she says. “I really believed we had done the right thing in Iraq. But when I came home I realized most people didn’t agree. I became conflicted as I learned new facts about why we went to war in Iraq in the first place.”

But nothing had changed in her family life. “It was the same dysfunctional family,” she says. “I couldn’t bring up my daughter in that atmosphere. So I started couch surfing with friends.”

But after about six weeks her welcome wore out.

“I wound up going to the city’s Homeless Emergency Assistance Unit,” she says. “You have to report to a place in the Bronx, and by the evening they put you on a bus to a different shelter every night. They kept pressuring me, saying they couldn’t get me housing if I had family in Brooklyn. But I couldn’t go back to that family.”

So Goodwin took the homeless shuttle to a new shelter every night. “There were fights over space. It was horrible. The best thing about having served in the Army and the war was that it prepared me for the homeless war back home. This time I was really fighting a daily war to protect my daughter.”

After six months, the Coalition for the Homeless found her a one-bedroom apartment in Harlem.

“I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder by the Veterans Administration,” she says. “I applied for a VA disability pension. I was denied twice. I reapplied over a year ago, and I’m still waiting to hear.”

The average wait for a veteran to receive benefits that have been granted in New York is 600 days.

“But once I got an apartment I got a job in purchasing in the Bronx,” she says. “I also went to CCNY on the GI Bill and earned a BA in liberal arts. My depression became so severe at one point that I lost custody of my daughter for six months until counseling and therapy helped me out. I have my daughter back now. She just had her 10th birthday.”

And as the Iraq War marked a 10th anniversary this week, Nicole Goodwin had a different perspective on that war for which she left her infant daughter.

“Looking back I think of all the troops who died,” she says. “And veterans who are still dying here at home from drug abuse, alcoholism, suicide from depression caused by PTSD, unemployment and homelessness. And I ask myself: How could the people who lied to us look in the mirror? How can the people who lied about the WMD, the link to 9/11 that got us into the Iraq War sleep at night? How could the government forget about the veterans that fought the war? Don’t tell me they haven’t been forgotten. I know different.”
3. Ending the Claims Backlog

3.1 - MSNBC (Video): The Rachel Maddow Show (Mar 20, 1M; New York, NY)

VIDEO

3.2 - USA Today (Military Times): Veterans Affairs official asks for patience on claims (Mar 20, Rick Maze, 1.7M; McLean, VA)

WASHINGTON — An embattled Veterans Affairs Department official responsible for the growing mountain of benefits claims pleaded Wednesday for more time to show success in getting them processed.

Allison Hickey, the retired Air Force brigadier general who for two years has been VA's undersecretary for benefits, said she continues to believe it is possible to eliminate the backlog of claims by the end of 2015 and to complete initial claims within 125 days with 98% accuracy.

The heap of pending claims is growing because she has ordered offices to look at the oldest claims first, which means 2-year-old claims now are being completed ahead of newer claims, she said.

"It would have made our productivity look better, but I chose not (to)," she said.

Hickey testified before a skeptical House Veterans' Affairs Committee, a panel whose chairman has called for her removal.

"There are many people, myself included, who are losing patience as we continue to hear the same excuses from VA about increased workload and increase complexity of claims," said Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., the committee chairman.

"VA's demonstrated history shows its inability or refusal to forecast problems and anticipate its needs," Miller said. "The only people paying a price for this failure are the veterans. The time for excuses is over."

Rep. Michael Michaud of Maine, the panel's ranking Democrat, said he is skeptical that the department can meet its goal because it would require processing 3.4 million claims in 2½ years.
Hickey's testimony comes as VA has more than 895,000 pending claims with 70% older than 125 days, the agency's self-imposed processing deadline.

As Hickey testified, a veteran sat in a wheelchair in the front row at the hearing, holding a sign that said he has had a claim pending for 2,560 days. He occasionally changed signs with another that said he also has been waiting 200 days for a heart bypass operation at a Miami veterans hospital.

Not only Congress has the feeling that solving the claims problem would take more than the department can manage. Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America is pushing for a presidential commission to study the issue and make outside recommendations.

3.3 – CNN (Video): Veterans waiting years for benefits (Mar 20, Jake Tapper, 451k New York, NY)

3.4 - Chicago Tribune: VA trying to move faster on benefits claims (Mar 20, Paul Muschick, 412k; Chicago, IL)

Our government historically has armed soldiers with the technology necessary to succeed on the battlefield, enabling them to topple targets like Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. Washington finally is recognizing the importance of technology on the home front, too, where it can help soldiers who come home beaten and bloodied.

While much of America went digital years ago, the Department of Veterans Affairs is just now deploying a paperless claims system to speed up the processing of soldiers' requests for disability benefits. As of last month it was being used in 18 regional claims processing offices with plans to expand it to 38 others, including Philadelphia, sometime this year.

"We recognize that too many veterans are waiting too long to get the benefits they have earned, and that is unacceptable," VA Undersecretary for Benefits Allison Hickey said in a statement a few months ago touting the change. "This is a decades-old problem, and we are implementing a robust plan to address it."

That's great. I've been writing for years about veterans complaining about the claims backlog, how their paperwork got lost and even allegations that paperwork was shredded. But if this has been a decades-old problem, why did it take the government so long to recognize that pushing paper wasn't the fastest way to process these important claims?
VA spokeswoman Meagan Lutz told me the current administration couldn't speak for what happened before Eric Shinseki was named veterans affairs secretary in 2009. In an email, she told me Shinseki "pushed for more funding for staff and claims processing" and to use technology to process benefits claims faster.

But the problem has actually gotten worse under Shinseki's watch. The average time to process a claim grew from 161 days in 2009 to 260 days last year, according to the Government Accountability Office.

The VA said there are reasons for that.

It says there has been an increased demand for benefits for several reasons, including the lengthy war on terror and increased outreach to inform veterans of the benefits available to them. In addition, under Shinseki, the VA began recognizing medical conditions associated with exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam and Southeast Asia and simplified the process to file claims for combat post-traumatic stress disorder.

"These decisions expanded access to benefits for hundreds of thousands of veterans and brought significantly more claims into the system," the VA said in January's news release.

As of August, two-thirds of all benefits claims — about 568,000 out of about 856,000 — were considered backlogged, meaning they were pending for more than 125 days, according to the Government Accountability Office. That includes claims for disability benefits for injuries suffered or aggravated during military service and claims for pension benefits, which are available to veterans based on their income.

The VA said the new paperless process system will eliminate the claims backlog by the end of 2015 and allow the agency to process claims with 98 percent accuracy within 125 days. The Government Accountability Office isn't convinced, though.

"The extent to which VA is positioned to meet this ambitious goal remains uncertain," the GAO said in a December report analyzing the agency's claims processing.

The VA said processing time was cut nearly in half during tests of the system. With electronic files, multiple workers can review a file at the same time. Workers don't have to wait for a paper folder to be transported, and there won't be a chance to lose or misplace a file. Claims will be filed electronically by veterans through the VA website, or converted to electronic files if submitted on paper.

"Our approach to claims processing is being modernized to better serve veterans and address the complex claims our employees are dealing with every day," Shinseki said in January's news release touting the change.

Only new claims are being handled paperless as each regional office joins the new processing system. So the change won't have any direct effect on veterans who have claims pending, or are appealing claims decisions.

I wrote Sunday about Army veteran Matthew Ford waiting nearly three years for the Board of Veterans' Appeals to rule on his latest appeal seeking benefits for bronchial asthma related to his service in the Vietnam War.
Ford, of Hanover Township, Northampton County, says his lungs were damaged when he burned human waste with gasoline in a camp cleanup detail and when he was exposed to herbicides used to kill vegetation the enemy used for cover. Ford first applied for benefits for his breathing issues in 1995.

If the VA's paperless system can process new claims faster and more efficiently, maybe veterans like Ford will benefit eventually because there won't be as many appeals filed and those that are pending will be resolved sooner. The Government Accountability Office said in its report that VA offices have shifted resources away from appeals to handle claims in recent years, leading to lengthy appeals times.

Veterans organizations support the VA's move to a paperless claims system. But several of them testified in December at a U.S. House committee hearing that a new system alone is not the answer to better serving injured soldiers.

"While attention remains focused on the size of the … claims backlog, it is important to recognize that eliminating the backlog does not necessarily reform the claims processing system, nor does it guarantee that veterans will be better served," testified Jeffrey Hall, assistant national legislative director of Disabled American Veterans.

More information is on my blog at http://blogs.mcall.com/watchdog.

3.5 - Washington Examiner: **Lawmakers scoff as VA exec claims progress on vets benefit claims** (Mar 20, Mark Flatten, 292k)

A top Department of Veterans Affairs official said today that recent reforms have led to dramatic increases in speed and accuracy in processing disability claims, an assertion that was quickly challenged by skeptical congressional overseers and the agency's own numbers.

Allison Hickey, VA's undersecretary for benefits, told the House Committee on Veterans Affairs that the accuracy scores of claims raters has increased four percentage points in the last year.

But the VA's website shows the 86.3 percent accuracy rate has improved only about 1 percentage point from a year ago, and is virtually identical to what it was in 2008.

Hickey told The Washington Examiner in a brief interview after the hearing that she is privy to new and more detailed figures that show the improvements in quality, which will soon be reflected when new data is posted on the agency's official disclosure web site.

Committee members did not buy Hickey's rosy scenario. They responded with a barrage of their own numbers, all of which added up to longer delays for veterans seeking benefits because of service-connected injuries or medical conditions.

"In my mind, the math simply doesn't add up," Rep. Mike Michaud, D-Maine, said of Hickey's certainty that VA will meet Secretary Eric Shinseki's pledge to process all disability and pension within 125 days with 98 percent accuracy by 2015.
"I also question whether VA is being upfront with Congress about its challenges." Michaud is the ranking Democrat on the veterans committee.

Almost 900,000 veterans have claims pending at VA, about 70 percent of which have been stuck in the system more than 125 days. Another 250,000 or so are appealing their initial rating decisions, which adds years to the process.

Veterans waited an average of 94 days for an initial rating decision in 1997, according to figures cited by committee chairman Jeff Miller, R-Fla. Today, the wait is about 279 days.

Productivity has plummeted, with the average full-time worker processing 136 claims in 1997 but only 73 last year. VA's budget for claims processing has tripled to about $1.75 billion since 1997.

The number of employees doing the work has gone from 5,177 to more than 14,500 in that time.

"VA's disability benefits backlog problem is getting worse, not better, and veterans are suffering as a result," Miller said after the hearing. "When it comes to disability benefits claims processing, VA is losing ground or stagnating in every key measure they've asked that Congress use to evaluate their performance.

"VA has a history of sugar-coating the problems it faces and overstating its ability to solve those problems. Unfortunately, that type of approach doesn't help the department and certainly doesn't help the nearly 900,000 veterans who are waiting for VA to make a decision on their disability benefits claim."

Several committee members grilled Hickey as to whether official speed and accuracy numbers are being manipulated.

Miller asked whether management has directed front-line workers to process simple claims first to make it look like speed is improving.

Diana Rubens, another top official who accompanied Hickey, responded "I believe the answer to that is no."

In fact, older and more complex cases have been prioritized, which tends to increase overall average processing times, Hickey said.

Rep. Tim Huelskamp, R-Kansas, asked whether regional managers have falsified speed and accuracy data to improve their numbers.

"I'm not aware of any integrity problems in my regional offices," Hickey replied.

Earlier this year, The Washington Examiner published a multi-part series entitled "Making America's Heroes Wait" that exposed ways agency employees manipulate internal data to make it appear more claims are being processed faster and more accurately than is actually the case. That investigation cited multiple inquiries by the VA's inspector general and the Government Accountability Office.
Ten years ago today, the United States led a coalition to invade Iraq — a decision which created effects that remain today particularly in terms of the backlog of helping veterans who served during the military action.

Those who served in Iraq returned to find it difficult to get the help needed. That problem isn’t unique to Iraqi war veterans. The Oakland U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs office has a backlog of more than 25,700 claims. For many veterans, it can take one to two years to get access to needed and deserved services — a problem local elected officials and veterans say must be fixed.

U.S. Rep. Jackie Speier, D-San Mateo, said the anniversary merited much reflection. The war was originally estimated to cost $50 billion to $60 billion and has cost an estimated $2 trillion including the care of those who served, she said. That’s on top of the casualties — both military and civilian.

Those impacted in the Bay Area who are trying to get help through Veterans Affairs face a long wait.

San Carlos native Mike Liguori, a former Marine who did two tours in Iraq, said health services have remained big issues. Liguori struggled with his transition back to civilian life. He waited nearly two years to get access to health services and had to apply twice. Now, as an active member of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America and the Wounded Warrior Project, he has met more veterans and has a better understanding that these issues aren’t isolated. Female veterans, for example, are struggling to find services that are right for them. And all veterans are waiting far too long to get any help.

In an effort to help those stuck in the backlog, Speier is hosting the second annual Veteran’s Fix-It event from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Friday, April 19 at the War Memorial Veterans Building, 401 Van Ness Ave., Room 207, in San Francisco.

“Last year’s first Fix-It Event was jammed to capacity with hundreds of veterans justifiably upset with how long the VA was taking to adjudicate their disability claims,” said Speier, whose office has since helped veterans get more than $3 million in benefits.

The waiting time at the Oakland office remains at an average of nearly 450 days, according to Speier’s office.

The Fix-It event, co-sponsored by U.S. Rep. Barbara Lee, D-Oakland, will feature the six Oakland VA claims representatives who will meet with veterans attending the event.

Also, Speier and Lee will hold a town hall at the event, starting at 10 a.m. They will take questions from veterans. Also speaking will be Douglas Bragg, director of the Oakland VA and a contingent of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. He is expected to discuss employment issues in the Bay Area. The event will also feature presentations by area employers along with a display of artwork by combat veterans.
Speier said the event is for all veterans, not just those dealing with claims issues.

Liguori noticed that, while waiting, many veterans are doing what they can on their own to help the healing process — like writing. Liguori released “The Sandbox, Stories of Human Spirit and War” last year, which shares his experiences while in the military. There’s also an increased effort to join together to share experiences in an effort to help others. For Liguori, helping meant starting a nonprofit that offers life coaching services to other veterans. It’s small at the moment because he can only serve a few individuals but, through Operation Work Warrior, he’s able to help individuals. And for Liguori, that’s a worthwhile effort.

Those interested in attending the Fix-It event should pre-register to get priority. Veterans can register by emailing Richard.Steffen@mail.house.gov or calling 342-0300. Those interested in Liguori’s book, “The Sandbox, Stories of Human Spirit and War,” can get a copy through Amazon.

3.7 – Marine Corps Times: VA official: Be patient on claims backlog (Mar 20, Rick Maze, 9k; Springfield, VA)

An embattled Veterans Affairs Department official responsible for the growing mountain of benefits claims pleaded Wednesday for more time to show success in getting them processed.

Allison Hickey, the retired Air Force brigadier general who for two years has been VA’s undersecretary for benefits, said she continues to believe it is possible to eliminate the backlog of claims in 2015 and to complete initial claims within 125 days with 98 percent accuracy.

The heap of pending claims is growing, she said, because she has ordered offices to file the oldest claims first, which means two-year-old claims are now being completed ahead of newer claims. “I would have made our productivity look better, but I chose not [to],” she said.

Hickey testified before a skeptical House Veterans’ Affairs Committee, a panel whose chairman has called for her removal. “There are many people, myself included, who are losing patience as we continue to hear the same excuses from VA about increased workload and increase complexity of claims,” said Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., the committee chairman.

“VA’s demonstrated history shows its inability or refusal to forecast problems and anticipate its needs,” Miller said. “The only people paying a price for this failure are the veterans. The time for excuses is over.”

Rep. Michael Michaud of Maine, the panel’s ranking Democrat, said he is skeptical VA can meet the goal because it would require processing 3.4 million claims in 2½ years.

Hickey’s testimony comes as VA has more than 895,000 pending claims, with 70 percent older than 125 days, the VA’s self-imposed processing deadline.
As she testified, a veteran sat in a wheelchair in the front row at the hearing, holding a sign that said he has had a claim pending before VA for 2,560 days. He occasionally changed signs, with another that said he also has been waiting 200 days for a heart bypass operation at a Miami veterans hospital.

There is a growing feeling that solving the claims problem would take more than VA can manage. Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America is pushing for a presidential commission to study the issue and make outside recommendations.

3.7 – The Daily Beast: Head of V.A. Benefits to Testify for Her Job (Mar 20, Bob Brewin, 2.2M/mo; Washington, DC)

Rep. Jeff Miller (R-FL), chairman of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, thinks it’s time for a shake-up within Veterans Affairs. Specifically, he wants Allison Hickey, the VA’s undersecretary for benefits, to resign. “I don’t think she’s equipped to handle the problems that exist out there,” said Miller, pointing to a regular pattern of delays experienced by veterans waiting to receive disability payments. “I think she is overwhelmed, and I would call for a replacement.” Hickey will testify before the House Committee on Wednesday.

3.8 - KNTV-TV: House Committee Leader Calls for Head of VA Benefits to Resign (Mar 20, Aaron Glantz, 241k/mo; San Jose, CA)

Concerned about broken promises of assistance for the nation’s veterans, Rep. Jeff Miller, chairman of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, called on Tuesday for the head of the agency’s benefits administration to resign.

Allison Hickey, the VA’s undersecretary for benefits, is scheduled to testify before Miller’s committee on Wednesday morning about the chronic delays encountered by veterans awaiting disability benefits. In a Capitol Hill interview with the Center for Investigative Reporting this morning, Miller cited a lack of transparency, lengthening delays and a number of veterans disability claims that the VA projects will soon pass 1 million as reasons Hickey should step down.

“I don’t think she’s equipped to handle the problems that exist out there,” Miller said. “I think she is overwhelmed, and I would call for a replacement.”

The call for Hickey’s resignation falls during a week of remembrance in Washington, marking the 10-year anniversary of the Iraq War.

In a statement, VA spokesman Joshua Taylor said the agency agreed that “too many veterans are waiting too long for their benefits,” but said that Hickey would stay on to implement an “aggressive plan to fix the backlog.”
Miller’s comments came a week after CIR revealed the number of veterans waiting more than a year for their disability claims had increased by more than 2,000 percent under President Barack Obama – from 11,000 in 2009 to 245,000 in December.

The report was based on internal VA documents that have not been provided to Congress – or the public. The documents also showed that veterans filing their first claim, including those returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan, wait more than 315 days on average. In major metropolitan areas, those veterans are waiting nearly two years for an answer.

By 2015, Taylor said, virtually no veterans will wait more than four months for their benefits – a promise the VA has continued to make even as trends slid in the opposite direction.

Veterans advocates cast doubt on the sincerity of that vow, a concern one group of veterans is planning to bring directly to the White House on Wednesday. Dozens of members of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America in Washington this week will ask members of Congress to sign a petition demanding Obama create a presidential commission charged with eliminating the backlog.

Some advocates said they would welcome a change at the top of the VA benefits administration.

“When you have a company, any company, that doesn’t perform, you fire the CEO,” said Shad Meshad, a former Vietnam War combat medic and head of the National Veterans Foundation, based in Los Angeles.

The Los Angeles office, which serves veterans from Bakersfield and San Luis Obispo to the Orange County line, is among the urban claims centers with the worst track record. The VA’s internal documents show the average wait time for veterans filing their first claim there is 619 days.

Since 2009, the year that Obama took office, the number of Los Angeles-area veterans waiting more than a year for their benefits has increased from 156 to nearly 14,000, the documents show.

“We tell veterans don’t shoot yourself, don’t shoot your wife, just stick with it and we’ll see what we can do while you wait two years for your benefits,” Meshad said of the Iraq and Afghanistan veterans he counsels. “The system sucks.”

Miller said he would be presenting his own documents at Wednesday’s hearing, showing that VA worker productivity has declined each year during the Obama presidency. He said he would ask Hickey about the declining productivity and ask her to consider firing poorly performing managers.

In an interview, the House Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy said many incompetent VA managers need to go, including Dennis Kuewa, the head of the Los Angeles office. McCarthy said Kuewa told congressional staff that he had never worked in claims processing.

“We need someone who will actually solve the problems,” McCarthy said. “We need a cultural change.”

Kuewa could not be reached for comment.
Both McCarthy and Miller stopped short of calling for the resignation of VA Secretary Eric Shinseki, a four-star Army general and Vietnam combat veteran.

“I don’t believe his staff serves him well because I believe they keep him sequestered,” Miller said. “They keep him uninformed.”

3.9 – KWWL-TV (Video): Thousands of Iowa veterans in compensation claim backlog (Mar 20, Becca Habegger, 203k/mo; Dubuque, IA)

VIDEO

DUBUQUE (KWWL) - More than 6,000 Iowa veterans are waiting on claims they've filed with the US Department of Veterans Affairs. These are claims of pension and compensation for injuries suffered during service.

Workload numbers published by the US Department of Veterans Affairs show that of the approximately 900,000 pending claims across the US, 70 percent have been pending for more than four months.

That means hundreds of thousands of veterans seeking pension or compensation for service-related injuries, ranging from arthritis and cancer to post traumatic stress disorder, have no other option but to wait.

Veteran Doug Slaats served in the US Army for more than 20 years. After retiring, he filed a claim of compensation for some arthritis and joint injuries he said he sustained during his service.

"I filed that in September of 2010," he said. "My claim has been ongoing. I just received my first compensation benefit claim about that in 2013, February."

His situation is not unique. Approximately 900,000 veterans across the nation are also waiting on claims for compensation and/or pension.

Charlie Brimeyer is the executive director of the Dubuque County Veterans Affairs office and said the VA system has a shortage of people who rate the claims.

"The backlog nationwide is atrocious," he said. "Hurts the process. Makes us look bad. Makes the VA look worse, and they need to hire more people to do the work."

The more than 6,000 Iowa claims will only see more join them, Brimeyer said.

Consider that living veterans of peace time plus all American wars are filing these claims. As the US Department of Veterans Affairs continues to add conditions to its list of recognized service-related injuries, the amount of claims are expected to grow.

For example, the VA has recognized a number of conditions they now say do come from exposure to Agent Orange, a chemical sprayed during the Vietnam War. Many of those Vietnam vets are just now filing claims for medical conditions they have been suffering for years.
"No one minds waiting a little while, but when you're waiting two, three years-- I have friends who have waited longer," Slaats said.

Every county in Iowa has a Veterans Affairs Office. Brimeyer said he encourages vets filing a claim to contact their county's office.

The VA now offers what's called a fully developed claim, Brimeyer said, that drastically shortens the response time. It's a claim where the veteran provides more detailed and specific information and paperwork up front, pointing the person who rates the claim to the precise information he or she needs. Brimeyer said one Dubuque County veteran got a response -- including compensation -- in a matter of 10 days.

3.11 – NextGov: House Lawmaker Wants VA Benefits Chief To Resign (Mar 20, Bob Brewin, 21k/mo; Washington, DC)

Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, called on Allison Hickey, the Veterans Affairs Department's undersecretary for benefits, to resign due to the growing backlog of disability claims.

Miller called for Hickey's resignation yesterday in an interview with the Berkley, Calif.-based Center for Investigative Reporting. She is scheduled to testify today at a Committee hearing on disability claims processing that will examine employee training and workload management, among other things.

VA reported Monday that it has a backlog of 895,838 claims, 70 percent of which (629,585) have been in limbo for more than 125 days. Miller told the Center for Investigative Reporting that Hickey is not equipped to handle the problems. “I think she is overwhelmed, and I would call for a replacement,” he said.

In a post on the VA's Vantage Point blog yesterday, Hickey conceded the claims backlog was “unacceptable,” but she also defended the department’s work to whittle down a backlog caused by a huge influx of Afghanistan and Iraq veterans filing claims, the expansion of benefits for Vietnam veterans exposed to the Agent Orange herbicide, and liberalized rules for post-traumatic stress disorder claims.

Asked to comment on Miller’s request that Hickey resign, VA spokesman Josh Taylor said Hickey will continue to manage “VA’s aggressive plan to fix the backlog and ensure our veterans receive the timely, quality benefits they need and deserve.” The foundation of that plan is the department's paperless processing system, which aims to eliminate the claims backlog by 2015.
3.12 – C-SPAN3 (Video): Head of V.A. Benefits to Testify for Her Job (Mar 20, Washington, DC)

VIDEO

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4. Veteran Opportunities for Education/GI Bill

4.1 – The Boston Globe (AP): RI lawmakers want college aid for veterans (Mar 20, 2.8M/mo; Boston, MA)

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP) — Noting the 10th anniversary of the beginning of the war in Iraq, Gov. Lincoln Chafee and members of the state’s General Assembly on Wednesday detailed several proposal that they said would help veterans return to civilian life in Rhode Island.

The legislation they highlighted would boost assistance to veterans enrolling in the state’s higher education system, give veterans preference in seeking state contracts and make it easier for them and their spouses to obtain professional licenses.

Another proposal would create a commission to study services for those suffering from post-traumatic stress.

“I grew up in the Vietnam era and I can remember not only the horrible war but the returning veterans and the difficulties they had,” said Chafee, an independent. “Here we are, 10 years later (after the start of the Iraq war) and we are dealing with some of the same issues.”

Later Wednesday, the state Senate passed another of the proposals: legislation that would add a veteran and a representative from the U.S. Veterans’ Administration to a state council tasked with fighting homelessness. The Senate also passed several resolutions calling on state and federal agencies to do more to help veterans and small businesses owned by veterans.

“We’re committed to doing everything we can to help veterans have a smooth transition back to civilian life,” said Sen. Walter Felag, D-Warren, who leads the Senate’s veterans’ affairs committee.

The other bills remain under consideration and have not been scheduled for votes.

One Rhode Island veteran who spoke at Wednesday’s event said he was surprised to learn that while the state has programs designed to help businesses owned by minorities or women, businesses owned by veterans aren’t given the same preference. Emil Cipolla served in the U.S. Air Force during the Vietnam War and now works for a medical supplies company. He said proposals to help returning service members can go a long way to making a veteran feel welcome and wanted.

“And the state would benefit from the strengths and skills of the veterans,” he said.
4.2 – Army Times: Senate votes to restore tuition assistance (Mar 20, Rick Maze, 264k/wk; Springfield, VA)

The Senate voted Wednesday to restore tuition assistance for all services, reversing a budget-cutting move ordered by the Army, Air Force, Marine Corps and Coast Guard.

Sponsored by Sens. James Inhofe, R-Okla., and Kay Hagan, D-N.C., the order is part of the Senate’s version of the 2013 budget. If it becomes law — and that is not yet certain — it would apply only through the end of this fiscal year on Sept. 30.

The amendment, passed by voice vote, does not say how the cost would be covered, only that the Defense Department would have to restore funding.

“Veterans mobilized to reinstate tuition assistance, and today the Senate listened,” said Ryan Gallucci, deputy legislative director of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, who used tuition assistance when he was a civil affairs specialist to work toward a college degree.

No similar provision is included in the House version of the government funding bill, HR 933, so the fate of tuition assistance rests with negotiations to work out a compromise measure. There is a March 27 deadline for completing the bill because that is when current federal funding expires. Without the extension, a government shutdown is possible.

Student Veterans of America is one of the groups that has been pushing to restore tuition assistance since the services began, one by one, announcing its termination.

“Restoring tuition assistance is absolutely critical to the long-term vitality of our service members,” said Michael Dakduk, SVA’s executive director. “Education leads to success, both in uniform and out. By cutting tuition assistance, we set a dangerous precedent in our country that education is not valued in our military.”

Inhofe, ranking Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, and Hagan, chairwoman of the armed services subcommittee on emerging threats, had both pressed for an amendment to the appropriations bill and introduced separate, free-standing legislation to restore a benefit that they said did not need to be cut.

“Denying educational benefits to our men and women in uniform is not the way to get our fiscal house in order,” said Hagan in a statement. “Many of our service members join the forces with the goal of advancing their educations, and we must keep our promises to them.”

Inhofe said, “This is an earned benefit that not only assists in recruiting and retention efforts for our all-volunteer force, but it also improves the lives of our men and women as they seek leadership opportunities within the military.”
5. Women Veterans

6. Sequestration

7. Other

7.1 - The Wall Street Journal: Veterans Face Elevated Unemployment Rates (Mar 20, Ben Casselman, 1.2M/mo; New York, NY)

A decade after the launch of the war in Iraq, one troubling legacy is clear: persistently high unemployment among veterans.

Veterans who served in Iraq or Afghanistan (or in many cases, both) had an unemployment rate of 10.9% in August 2012, according to new data released by the Labor Department on Wednesday. Among nonveterans, the unemployment rate was 7.9% at the time.

Among the broader population of veterans who have served on active duty since September 2011 — wherever they served — the unemployment rate was 9.9%, still significantly higher than for both non-veterans and for veterans of earlier conflicts. Those who served during the first Gulf War had an unemployment rate of just 5.9%.

Unemployment among post-Sept. 11 veterans has been a persistent problem, despite various public and private-sector programs to put them back to work. The issue is partly one of demographics. The typical veteran of what the Labor Department refers to as “Gulf War era II” is male and under age 35 — two groups with elevated unemployment rates in the population at large.

But demographics alone don’t explain the gap. The unemployment rate for Gulf War era II vets between ages 25 and 34 is 10.6%; for those under age 25, it is over 20%. Both figures are well above the equivalent rates for civilians, or even just civilian men.

Veterans’ employment challenges might seem surprising, and not only because of the goodwill that their service engenders among many Americans. Returning veterans have many traits that make them desirable employees: discipline, leadership experience, problem-solving ability and, often, hard-to-find trade skills.

But veterans also face hurdles that most civilians don’t. Some 28% of Gulf War era II veterans have a service-related disability; 9% are at least 60% disabled. They also have less work experience. Veterans who served in the reserves or National Guard — who are presumably more likely to have had civilian work experience — had unemployment rates more in line with the general population.
The good news: Veterans’ job prospects are improving. Their unemployment rate dropped more than two percentage points from 2011 to 2012, a faster rate of improvement than the population as a whole. But the situation remains grim: More than 200,000 recent veterans remain unemployed, and nearly half a million more are out of the labor force altogether.

7.2 - The Wall Street Journal: NY would give tax credits to hire recent veterans (Mar 20, 1.2M/mo; New York, NY)

ALBANY, N.Y. — The state Senate's Independent Democratic Conference says the state budget will include five-figure tax credits to employers to hire recent veterans as a way to reduce the high unemployment rate of service members returning from combat.

IDC spokesman Eric Soufer (SO-fer) says conference leader Sen. Jeff Klein, Gov. Andrew Cuomo and other legislative leaders are so far supporting the measure in the budget, which is still being negotiated.

It would provide an employer with a $10,000 tax credit for hiring a veteran who joined the service after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Hiring a disabled veteran would draw a $15,000 tax credit.

The measure would be part of about $700 million in tax credits announced by Senate Republican leader Dean Skelos.

The IDC and Republicans jointly run the Senate majority.

7.3 - CBS News (AP): Report: Jobs picture for veterans improved in 2012 (Mar 20, 7.4M/mo; New York, NY)

The jobs picture for the nation's veterans improved significantly last year, particularly for those who have served since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the Labor Department said Wednesday.

The annual report from the Bureau of Labor Statics shows that the unemployment rate for the latest generation of veterans fell from 12.1 in 2011 to 9.9 percent last year. About a third of the people who make up that category of veterans served in Iraq or Afghanistan, or both.

The Labor Department report reinforces that, as a whole, veterans actually have an easier time finding work than nonveterans. The unemployment rate stood at 7 percent last year for all veterans, compared to 7.9 percent for nonveterans, according to the report.

However, the nation's youngest veterans are the exception to that longstanding trend. They continue to have a harder time finding work than their nonveteran peers, and nearly 1 in 5 was unemployed.
The federal government and private sector are participating in several initiatives placing greater emphasis on hiring veterans. Congress approved tax credits for companies that hire veterans and also required the military to provide transition training to those leaving the service. Many companies announced efforts to hire more vets in the past two years.

The report also points to possible difficulties for veterans if federal, state and local governments undertake furloughs, or possibly job cuts, to deal with budget trims. One third of veterans with a service-connected disability work in the public sector, as do nearly a quarter of the Iraq and Afghanistan-era veterans.

U.S. troops injured in Iraq face tough homecoming
Young veterans still face higher unemployment
By comparison, only about 14 percent of nonveterans work in the public sector.

The report also indicated that while the unemployment picture brightened for male veterans, there was little change among female veterans.

The unemployment rate for female veterans stood at 8.3 percent compared to 7.7 percent among their nonveteran counterparts, the report stated.

7.4 - Baltimore Sun: Md. veterans official accused in benefits kickback scheme (Mar 20, Ian Duncan, 180k; Baltimore, MD)

A former high-ranking official at the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs has been accused of running a kickback scheme from his state office, allegedly fabricating military achievements and disability claims in exchange for a cut of the resulting government payouts.

According to a federal indictment made public Wednesday, David Clark secured $1.4 million in fraudulent payouts over 16 years. An Army veteran, Clark rose to deputy chief of claims at the state agency before retiring in 2011.

The indictment says he used his knowledge of the system to get the largest possible payouts before accepting cash in unmarked envelopes from veterans who were in on the scheme. He allegedly made up records including Vietnam tours, Purple Hearts and chronic illnesses caused by exposure to Agent Orange, which entitled his associates to federal health benefits and state tax waivers.

He saved some of his best work for himself, prosecutors say, claiming that he had been awarded medals including the Air Medal, Army Commendation Medal, Republic of Vietnam Gallant Cross and the National Service Defense Medal. He allegedly received benefits and waivers worth $153,633 between 1995 and 2012.

Clark is charged with wire fraud alongside eight other veterans, for whom he is accused of securing the benefits. Neither Clark nor his attorney could be reached for comment, and no court dates have been set in the case.
Phil Munley, the director of the Veterans Service and Benefits Program at the Maryland veterans department, said the agency conducted an investigation after learning of the allegations about Clark last spring.

"We didn't get any indication through our internal investigation that there was anyone [else] involved," Munley said, adding that he is not aware of any similar cases in Maryland. "Our staff is completely dedicated to serving veterans."

The allegations come as the Baltimore branch of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs faces one of the worst backlogs in the country. More than 16,000 claims have been unresolved for more than 125 days, according to government data published last week, leaving veterans unable to receive benefits to which they were entitled.

Joe Moore, a partner at Bergmann & Moore, a law firm that represents veterans making claims, said the department's outdated systems make it more difficult to catch schemes like the one in which Clark is accused.

"It's the kind of thing that if the VA were not 10 years behind the rest of the government, forget about the private economy ... just would never have happened," he said.

The charges stem from a U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs inspector general's investigation, which reported that it pursued 21 cases of fraudulent benefits claims in the most recent fiscal year, and Moore said he's seen other cases like Clark's.

"It goes on a lot where local guys like him take money on the side," he added.

A spokesman for the VA declined to comment because the case is continuing.

The department is upgrading to electronic files but still relies on paper records, which, according to the indictment, Clark was able to falsify undetected for many years. Moore said the way he is accused of carrying out the scheme suggests he knew the system well and had worked out how not to get caught.

"To be frank, it's fairly smart," he said.

Clark is accused of amending the records to back up claims that he and other veterans had been exposed in Vietnam to Agent Orange — a toxic chemical used to kill vegetation — and had contracted type 2 diabetes as a result.

He did that by submitting fake doctors' letters using the names and addresses of real physicians that stated that the claimants had the illness, according to the indictment. The doctors did not know what Clark was up to, the filing says.

Some of the veterans received lump sum payments and returned up to half of them to Clark in exchange for his help, according to the indictment.

Munley said the Maryland veterans department processes too many claims to double-check the accuracy of all information submitted to the federal department. Still, he said, the department has now built in extra checks on the activities of people who process applications.
In addition to creating the medical documents, Clark is accused of using counterfeit Department of Defense forms to change his service record and those of five other veterans. He changed the information of one Marine Corps veteran to show that he served for over a year in Vietnam, according to the indictment, and came home with three medals.

U.S. Attorney for Maryland Rod J. Rosenstein said the charges against Clark are among the most "egregious" of the government fraud cases he's handled.

"His job was to screen the claims and detect fraud, rather than introducing fraud into the system," he added.

7.5 - CNN Money: Veteran unemployment dropped to 9.9% in 2012 (Mar 20, Aaron Smith, 1.9M/mo; New York, NY)

The unemployment rate for veterans dropped last year, according to a report out Wednesday from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, but vets still lag behind non-vets in the job market.

The unemployment rate for veterans who have served in the U.S. military since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 dropped by 2.2 percentage points in 2012, to 9.9%.

But that's still higher than last year's 7.9% unemployment rate for nonveterans, the report said. Army veteran Marcel Rowley of South Lake Tahoe, Calif., who served in Afghanistan in 2006 and 2007, said that he had a difficult time trying to secure part-time employment while going to school on the GI Bill. "He said that as soon as he mentioned the time period during which he served, the job interview would "taper off," as the interviewer realized he was a war veteran.

"With all the ski resorts out here, you would think it would be fairly simple [ to get a job.]" he said. "But because of PTSD, companies won't hire veterans. It's because they're afraid they're going to have an episode in the work place."

Rowley, who has started up an advertising business, also said that serving in the infantry during combat did not provide him with skills that are valued by civilian employers.

Larry Korb, senior fellow at the think tank Center for American Progress and a Vietnam-era Navy veteran, said that fears of post-traumatic stress disorder and a lack of "transferable skills" are widespread issues for veterans -- especially infantry vets from the army and Marines -- who are looking for civilian jobs.

"I talked to a lot of vets who don't even say they were in the army, because there is this big concern about PTSD," said Korb, who was an assistant secretary of defense during the Reagan administration. "In terms of your technical proficiency, you're not going to learn a whole lot when you're doing counter-insurgency."

There was a similar disparity in 2011, when the unemployment for post-9/11 veterans was 12.1%, compared to 8.7% for nonveterans.
The unemployment rate for all veterans, not just those who served in the post-9/11 era, was relatively low at 7% last year, the report said.

Women veterans tended to have a higher unemployment rate than men, according to the report. Among post-9/11 veterans, men had an unemployment rate of 9.5% last year, compared to 12.5% for women.

Korb said that many women veterans, in addition to dealing with the stigma of PTSD, are also struggling with the high incidence of rape in the military.

"You get PTSD plus sexual violence, and it would make any person have more problems than normal," he said.

**7.6 - Knoxville News Sentinel: [Iraq veterans struggle with unemployment](https://knoxvillesentinel.com/2013/03/20/iraq-veterans-struggle-with-unemployment/) (Mar 20, Fred Brown, 75k; Knoxville, TN)**

Since the Gulf War of 1990, some 4.4 million military veterans have returned home to enter the U.S. jobs market, according to the latest U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs documents.

The VA collected employment histories of those returning veterans beginning in December 2004 up through 2007.

Looking at the unemployment rates for those returning veterans, the VA admits in the report that “unemployment is a problem” for returning veterans.

Some might even say it is a serious problem. The VA report shows that 18 percent of the veterans who were in Iraq are currently unemployed.

And of that number about 25 percent earn less than $21,840 a year.

A spokeswoman for the Tennessee Department of Veterans Affairs says those national numbers generally reflect what is happening in Tennessee.

“We don’t really have data broken out to highlight Iraq War veterans,” says Yvette Martinez, Assistant Commissioner of Outreach and Communications for the Tennessee Department of Veterans Affairs in Nashville.

“There is no breakdown of the unemployment rate (for Tennessee veterans).”

A depressing figure from the VA is that of those veterans who have been out of the service for more than six years, 52 percent register low family incomes.

The silver lining, perhaps, for many veterans is that of those who are able to find jobs, 61 percent are getting those opportunities in the private sector, according to the VA.
The East Tennessee Economic Development Agency reports that Knox County’s unemployment rate is 7.6 percent and per capita income is $35,491.00.

Knox County also has the lowest unemployment rate of its eight contiguous counties, according to the ETEDA.

**7.7 - Stars and Stripes: Veterans’ advocates lobby hard for attention on Capitol Hill** (Mar 20, Leo Shane, 70k; Washington, DC)

WASHINGTON — Nearly every major veterans advocacy organization has visited Capitol Hill over the last month, pushing lawmakers to keep the focus on their issues amid the financial fights in Congress.

This week, leaders from Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America brought dozens of young vets to Washington to visit lawmakers and relate their stories.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion held similar lobbying trips earlier in March, and the House and Senate veterans committees invited 18 different advocacy groups to testify on their priorities for the upcoming year.

Here’s a look at the top talking points from those lawmaker visits:

**Benefits backlog**

The still-growing backlog of veterans waiting for disability and compensation claims is the top priority of nearly every veterans organization this year. Over the last three years, the number of claims that took more than 125 days to process rose to more than 600,000 from 180,000.

Officials from the Department of Veterans Affairs say they are on a path toward fixing the problem, predicting they will eliminate the backlog in the next two years through a series of new processing programs.

Veterans advocates are skeptical.

Richard Delaney, president of the Retired Enlisted Association, told lawmakers he thinks the source of the problem is low staffing levels and poor management of claims processors. The veterans lobbyists are pushing for more incentives for top performers and more punishment for claims workers who fall behind.

**Suicides**

VA research shows an estimated 22 veterans commit suicide in America each day, up sharply from just a few years ago.
The department has hired more than 1,100 mental health staffers over the last seven months, but several outside veterans groups say that process should have started much earlier.

They've also praised expansion of the VA’s suicide hot line, but say officials need better outreach efforts to veterans suffering from depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury to prevent them from becoming suicidal.

“Much more needs to be done,” Bob Norton, deputy director at the Military Officers Association of America, said at a hearing last month. “A crisis of this magnitude requires a full court press at all levels in the government working with states and community providers."

Sequestration

The Department of Veterans Affairs is exempt from the $85 billion in across-the-board spending cuts that went into effect March 1, but veterans groups have kept it a key part of their platforms, saying it undermines military readiness and hurts the next generation of veterans.

Most of the sequestration conversation from the groups has focused on the cuts to defense programs, which will have secondary effects on veterans. Officials have said job training programs for separating service members and joint health initiatives between the Defense Department and VA will be pinched by the budget cuts.

They also said cuts to defense programs today can easily turn into cuts to veterans programs tomorrow.

“America will soon turn its attention to other national priorities once our troops come home,” said Richard Hamilton, national commander of the VFW. “That is why we are here (testifying on Capitol Hill) today, to assure our nation does not turn its back on the brave men and women who have borne the battle, and doesn’t forget their families who also served and sacrificed.”

Job training

Overall veterans unemployment has actually tracked better than national averages over the last few years. But veterans lobbyists say more needs to be done to help veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars make the transition from military service to civilian work.

That includes expanding job training opportunities for veterans of all ages, improvements to the post-9/11 GI Bill and easier credentialing in civilian jobs for those with military skills.

The veterans advocates note that getting fulfilling post-military jobs is often key in preventing homelessness and other reintegration problems.

7.8 – Army Times: Gov’t work boosts younger vets’ employment (Mar 20, Rick Maze, 264k/wk; Springfield, VA)
One in four Iraq and Afghanistan-era veterans have government jobs, primarily with the federal government, says a new Labor Department report that finds an improved employment picture for the post-9/11 generation.

Among the 2.6 million veterans who served in the military since Sept. 11, 2001, the unemployment rate dropped from 12 percent in 2011 to 9.5 percent in 2012.

Most of that progress appeared to be among men, as the jobless rate for female post-9/11 veterans was 12.5 percent in 2012, about the same as the previous year, says the veterans employment summary released Wednesday by the Labor Department’s Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Post-9/11 veterans, especially younger ones, have a higher unemployment rate than non-veterans of the same age, the report says. While most of the focus has been on veterans aged 18 to 24, whose jobless rate has been greater than 20 percent, the report says veterans aged 25 to 34 also have a higher unemployment rate than non-veterans in the same age range.

One-third of the employed post-9/11 male veterans and half of the female veterans are employed in management or professional occupations, the report says.

Government work, at the federal, state and local level, accounts for employment of 25 percent of post-9/11 veterans, compared with 14 percent of non-veterans. This is slightly higher than for veterans of all generations, who hold about 20 percent of public-sector jobs.

Federal employment accounts for 14 percent of employment for the Iraq and Afghanistan generation of veterans, while local governments make up 7 percent and state governments make up 4 percent, the report says.