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# Veterans Affairs Faces Surge of Disability Claims

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He jumped at loud noises, had unpredictable flashes of anger and was constantly replaying battle scenes in his head. When Damian J. Todd, who served two tours in Iraq with the Marine Corps, described those symptoms to a psychiatrist in January 2008, the diagnosis was quick: he was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Less swift was the government's response when Mr. Todd submitted, a month later, a disability claim that would entitle him to a monthly benefit check. Nearly 18 months went by before the [Department of Veterans Affairs](#) granted his claim late last month, Mr. Todd said.

Mr. Todd, 33, is part of a flood of veterans, young and old, seeking disability compensation from the department for psychological and physical injuries connected to their military service. The backlog of unprocessed claims for those disabilities is now over 400,000, up from 253,000 six years ago, the agency said.

The department says its average time for processing those claims, 162 days, is better than it has been in at least eight years. But it does not deny that it has a major problem, with some claims languishing for many months in the department's overtaxed bureaucracy.

"There are some positive signs in terms of what we're doing," said Michael Walcoff, deputy under secretary for benefits in the Veterans Benefits Administration. "But we know that veterans deserve better."

Mr. Walcoff said the department recently finished hiring 4,200 claims processors, but many will not be fully trained for months. The [Government Accountability Office](#) reported last year that the Veterans Affairs Department had about 13,000 people processing disability claims.

The larger significance of the backlog, veterans groups and officials said, is that resources for veterans are being stretched perilously thin by a confluence of factors beyond the influx of veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Aging Vietnam veterans with new or worsening ailments are requesting care. Layoffs are driving unemployed veterans into the department's sprawling health system for the first time. Congress has expanded certain benefits. And improved outreach efforts by the department have encouraged more veterans to seek compensation or care.

Mr. Walcoff said the vast majority of the 82,000 claims the department received each month were not from veterans returning from the current wars.

"We're still getting a lot of Vietnam vets," he said.

Veterans advocates say the actual backlog is nearing one million, if minor claims, educational programs and appeals of denied claims are factored in. They point to the discovery last year of benefits applications in disposal bins at several department offices as evidence of shoddy handling of claims. And they assert that they routinely see frustratingly long delays on what seem like straightforward claims.

One group, Veterans for Common Sense, has obtained records showing that some veterans are calling suicide hotlines to talk about their delayed disability claims. The group has called on the department to replace processors who take exceedingly long to handle claims.

"We're not saying vets are threatening to commit suicide over the claims issues," said Paul Sullivan, executive director of the group. "We're saying V.A.'s claim situation is so bad that it is exacerbating veterans' already difficult situations."

The sprawling veterans compensation and pension system is expected to pay \$44 billion in benefits to about three million people this year, the largest group of whom served during the Vietnam War.

Under the system, veterans who can demonstrate that a psychological or physical problem resulted from their military service are eligible for compensation and, if the injury is severe enough, free health care. (All new

veterans are eligible for health care for five years after they leave service, regardless of whether they are injured.)

Compensation is scaled by the severity of the disability: a veteran with dependents who is rated 100 percent disabled, and therefore unable to work, is eligible for more than \$3,000 a month.

Post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, has emerged as one of the most prevalent disability claims, after ailments like back pain and knee injuries. Not only are many new veterans receiving a diagnosis of the disorder, but an increasing number of Vietnam veterans are also reporting symptoms for the first time, officials and advocates said.

Delays in getting PTSD claims approved have prompted members of Congress to propose legislation that would reduce the documentation required to prove that a veteran's disorder was caused by specific combat events. Finding such documentation can be difficult for Vietnam veterans, whose memories of events 40 years ago may have grown hazy. Records from that era are also often difficult to find, advocates said.

Veterans who did not serve in combat units but who may have been in firefights or witnessed traumatic events like roadside bombings — common events in Iraq and Afghanistan — also report difficulties documenting the sources of their disorder.

Those hurdles have added to the claims backlog, advocates said. Legislation proposed by Representative John Hall, Democrat of New York, would require the government to grant claims by veterans with the disorder once they demonstrated simply that they had served in a combat theater, which would include all of Afghanistan, Iraq and Vietnam.

The projected cost of the legislation, \$4.7 billion over 10 years, according to the [Congressional Budget Office](#), has become a stumbling block. But Mr. Hall said the cost would be offset by the benefits of reducing the backlog, avoiding appeals of rejected claims and speeding compensation to veterans.

“We’ve got veterans sleeping under bridges or struggling to fit back in with their families or looking for jobs,” Mr. Hall said. “It’s no time to be messing around with compensation that we probably owe them and will probably pay them anyway.”

The legislation might have eased the process for Mr. Todd, who flew helicopters in Anbar Province for seven months in 2005 and then served 10 months with an infantry unit in Ramadi, an insurgent stronghold, in 2006 and 2007. He left the [Marines](#) in 2007 as a captain.

Many months after Mr. Todd received the PTSD diagnosis and first submitted his claim, the department asked him to document two stressful events that might have caused his trauma. For one, he described driving a girl to the hospital after she was torn apart by a bomb. She survived, but the memory still brings him to tears.

Now attempting to start his own business, Mr. Todd, who lives in Orange County, N.Y., said he would receive \$770 a month for his disorder, as well as for shoulder, back, knee and hearing problems linked to his service.

“There are a lot of other kids who need the money more,” he said. “I just want the process to change, because it is ridiculous.”