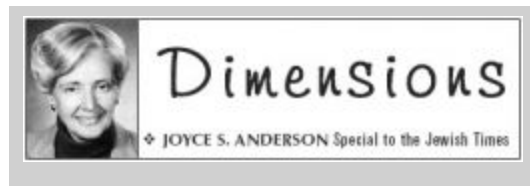


## Veterans' Disability Backlog: Over 400,000!

The VA figure of a six month delay in processing claims does not take into account the ordeal many veterans undergo as the process moves forward.

**JOYCE S. ANDERSON** Special to the Jewish Times



Six years ago, the VA's backlog of 253,000 was considered unacceptable. Now the number has soared to over 400,000 as veterans of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are joined by Vietnam veterans, many with new or worsening ailments.

A new study of the health records of 289,328 veterans of the current wars found that more than one-third of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans who enrolled in the veterans health system after 2001 received a diagnosis of a mental health problem, including post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, alcohol abuse and a combination of three or more problems. The report also found - not surprisingly - that mental health problems rose steadily the more tours of duty the soldiers and marines served. Michael Walcoff, deputy under secretary for benefits, said the vast majority of the 82,000 claims the department receives each month are not from current veterans. "We're still getting a lot of Vietnam vets."

The Government Accountability Office reported last year that the VA had about 13,000 people processing disability claims. Walcoff said the VA recently hired 4,200 disability processors with their training taking months. The average time for processing a claim is 162 days, but some claims take much longer. How does the system work? Veterans who can demonstrate that a physical or psychological problem resulted from their military service are eligible for compensation. If an injury is severe- free health care. All current veterans are eligible for health care for five years after they leave the service, regardless of whether they are injured. The severity of a disability determines the compensation; a veteran with dependents, who is rated 100 percent disabled, and unable to work is eligible for more than \$3000 a month.

Why has the backlog soared? Advocates for reform include Representative John Hall, Democrat of New York and House Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman, Bob Filner, Democrat from California. Both men have come up with creative ways to overcome the backlog. Congressman Hall has proposed legislation that would require the government to grant claims to veterans with PTSD as soon as they document they have served in a combat theater, including all of Iraq, Afghanistan and Vietnam. "We've got veterans sleeping under bridges or struggling to fit back in with their families or looking for jobs. It's no time to be messing around with compensation that we probably owe them and will probably pay them anyway." VA history supports the basis of his proposal since almost 90 percent of claims are eventually approved after delays, denials and appeals

move through the bureaucracy. Chairman Filner suggests another approach to reach the same goal. "Let the VA send a check - I immediately - for a 30 percent disability to every veteran who files a claim." This would pay the minimum level and then review claims for greater disability. Once proven, the rest would be paid.

The VA figure of a six month delay in processing claims does not take into account the ordeal many veterans undergo as the process moves forward. Martin Schram, the Scripps Howard News reporter, researched and wrote "Vets Under Siege: How American Deceives and Dishonors Those who Fight Our Battles." (2008) Schram accused VA adjudicators of "shamefully" adopting an adversarial mindset toward veterans. He wrote, "They challenge thousands of veterans claims in ways that are mindless and disrespectful." He described inexperienced VA adjudicators routinely challenging and denying claims of combat-related disabilities. He cited Army military policeman Eric Adams of Tampa, who led a truck convoy in Iraq when a roadside bomb exploded in front of his van and a tractor-trailer smashed into him from the rear. First the VA adjudicator said Adams hadn't been in combat because he was just an MP. Later another adjudicator ruled that he didn't have PTSD after two VA doctors had diagnosed it.

Schram has proposed paying our veterans benefits right now and stimulating the economy at the same time. He wrote in his column, "We can treat VA benefits claims like IRS tax returns. Select a sampling, perhaps 10 to 25 percent, to be reviewed - and immediately pay the claims of the rest. Pay the veterans, and they will quickly shovel it back into the economy - just like tax cuts. Except we will be repaying men and women who truly need and merit the money, unlike tax cuts given to folks because they have offshore tax shelters."

Veterans for Common Sense, an advocacy group, casts a different light on the backlog of disability claims. They obtained records showing that some veterans are calling suicide hotlines to talk about the prolonged delays in their claims and the hardships they are suffering. Paul Sullivan, the executive director, said, "We're not saying vets are threatening suicide over the claims issues. We're saying VA's claim situation is so bad that it is exacerbating veterans' already difficult situations." They have called on the VA to replace processors who have a record of taking exceedingly long time periods handling claims.

After Damian J. Todd, 33, served two tours of duty in Iraq with the Marine Corps, he was examined by a psychiatrist in January 2008. He described mental symptoms of unpredictable flashes of anger, replaying battle scenes constantly in his head, and jumping compulsively at loud noises. He was diagnosed quickly with PTSD, and submitted a disability claim a month later. Nearly 18 months later the VA finally granted his claim. During that time of delays and red tape, Todd was asked to document two stressful events that might have caused his trauma. He described driving a girl to the hospital after she had been torn apart by a bomb. She lived, but the memory of carrying her in his arms still brings tears to his eyes.

Todd, who is now attempting to start his own business, will receive \$770 a month for his PTSD as well as for shoulder, back, knee and hearing problems related to his combat service. He commented on the VA disability backlog, "There are a lot of other kids who need the money more. I just want the process to change, because it is ridiculous."

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