

Veterans share frustrations over filing claims, accessing services

By John Stang

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BREMERTON — A veteran seeking help for post-traumatic stress disorder also risks alienating potential employers scared of hiring someone who admits having PTSD.

Ex-servicemembers applying for veterans' assistance face paperwork nightmares and long delays in getting help.

Federal veterans assistance programs are skimpy on the Kitsap and Olympic peninsulas.

That's what several people told U.S. Sen. Patty Murray, D-Washington on Thursday in Bremerton. About 100 people attended a discussion of veterans issues with Murray at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post No. 239.

Murray wrote and is shepherding a bipartisan bill to improve job training and employment placement for veterans. It is currently awaiting a vote of the full U.S. Senate. A companion bill is working its way through the U.S. House.

Murray's office said there is a 27 percent unemployment rate among young veterans nationwide. Military unemployment payments, paid to ex-military personnel who are honorably discharged, increased from \$450 million in fiscal 2008 to \$882 million in fiscal 2010 with the 2011 figure expected to be higher, according to her office.

Leif Bentsen, a human services planner for Kitsap County, said the heavily military county has at least 36,000 veterans. And of the roughly 4,500 people collecting unemployment in Kitsap County, it is likely that 800 to 900 are veterans, he said.

Native Americans have a higher per capita representation among veterans than other ethnic groups, and Indian veterans have four times the unmet needs of non-Indian veterans, said former Marine Frank Cordero, a member of the Suquamish Tribe who is involved in veterans affairs.

Murray's bill would require every departing service member to go through the Transition Assistance Program, which tackles resume writing, interviewing skills and job hunting. Right now, use of that program is not mandatory.

The bill would also speed up the post-military federal employment process by fast-tracking the veterans through red tape. Also, red tape would be trimmed in transferring military skills to civilian certifications and training requirements — mimicking a state law recently passed by the Washington Legislature.

Many complaints voiced Thursday addressed delays in filing, tracking cases and searching for lost paperwork in the federal Veterans Affairs system.

Joel Courreges, commander of Chapter 5 of the Disabled American Veterans, said there are more than 32,000 claims for federal assistance by disabled veterans in Seattle, and more than 25,000 are still not completely processed after the 125-day deadlines to finish the work.

"I'm so frustrated by this," said Murray, who sits on the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee and is on the Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Subcommittee of the Senate Appropriations Committee.

"I really directed the VA to change the system so it's more coordinated and efficient. ... Here we are in the home of Microsoft, and we do not have the ability to track records. That's unbelievable," Murray said.

Some people noted that most veterans-assistance programs are based in Tacoma and Seattle with very little available in Kitsap, Jefferson and Clallam counties. The Olympic Medical Center in Port Angeles has a physician's assistant to help veterans, but it cannot get Veterans Affairs to provide a doctor, said the clinic's board chairman, Jim Cammack. The VA has not answered the clinic on why it cannot get a doctor, he said.

Post-traumatic stress disorder and military sexual trauma were also voiced as major concerns Thursday.

Some people said they were told not to mention their military-related disabilities to avoid spooking potential employers.

"We cannot have that message out there," Murray said.

Retired Navy veteran Tracy Brommel, a nurse at the Harrison Medical Center, said it is estimated that one-third to one-half of military women faced some type of sexual assault during their service and are reluctant to report those assaults. She called for the VA system to improve dealing with the psychological fallout of those cases.



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