

Veterans News

THOUSANDS OF VETS MISSING OUT ON BETTER BENEFITS

By KEVIN MAURER (AP)

WILMINGTON, N.C. — Only a fraction of wounded veterans who could get better benefits have applied in the two years since Congress, acting on concerns the military was cutting costs by downplaying injuries, ordered the Pentagon to review disputed claims.

As of mid-March, only 921 vets have applied out of the 77,000 the Pentagon estimates are eligible, according to numbers provided to The Associated Press by the Physical Disability Board of Review. The panel was created in 2008 but started taking cases in January 2009.

More than 230 cases have been decided, about 60 percent in favor of improving the veteran's benefits, while an additional 119 case were dismissed as ineligible.

Advocates and even the board members themselves want the review panel to do a better job of getting the word out.

"Quite frankly, I would like to see more opportunities for us to reach out to these people," said Michael LoGrande, president of the three-member board that has a staff of 10. "But we are doing the best we can with the limited people and resources we have."

LoGrande said the board is trying to reach eligible vets mainly through veterans groups

. At issue are disability ratings based on an injury's severity and long-term impact. Veterans rated below 30 percent disabled with less than 20 years of service receive a one-time severance payment instead of a monthly retirement check. Also, their health care switches from the military to the strained VA system, and their families lose military health insurance.

A rating above 30 percent means monthly income and military health care for the family.

A disabled service member's severance pay and monthly retirement is based on active-duty pay, years of service and if the service member's injuries are combat-related.

Congress created the board after investigations found inconsistencies in how the military assigns ratings for the level of disability that soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines have before they are discharged. Veterans advocates protested that the military was manipulating disability ratings to save money.

Orin Higgins, 30, injured his back while he was stationed in Korea. The Army discharged him on medical grounds in May 2006 with no benefits, even though the injury hampers everyday chores.

"Tying my shoes is difficult," said Higgins, from Mountain Grove, Mo. "I can't get a job because all I know is construction and roofing and you can't do that with a bad back."

Higgins appealed his Army rating to the Physical Disability Board of Review in May 2009 and was approved for a higher rating by the board in February.

"I think they've righted a wrong," he said.

The panel is managed by the Air Force and charged with reviewing appeals from former members of the armed forces who received disability ratings of less than 30 percent from Sept. 11, 2001 to Dec. 31, 2009. Before Congress created the streamlined process, veterans could appeal but were subjected to a lengthy review by a military panel that rarely changed the ratings.

"I think flat out that we've done exactly what the Hill wanted and what (the Office of the Secretary of Defense) wanted," LoGrande said, "and it has resulted in a bump in the number of people that flip to a disability retirement."

Under the new system, the board makes a recommendation in an average of about eight months. The recommendation is sent to the service secretaries, who more than 90 percent of the time have accepted the board's review, according to numbers provided by the board.

"I think each of these cases is given substantial rigor. We take exhaustive measures to make sure we're doing the right thing," LoGrande said. "That is why when I see the Army, which has the preponderance of applicants, adopting almost 100 percent of our recommendations."

Veterans advocates say more outreach is needed.

"Less than 1,000 have applied, to me they really need to do a better effort to get the word out," said Mike Hayden, deputy director of government relations for the Military Officers Association of America. "The success rate tells me there was a definite problem and the Physical Disability Board of Review is out there to correct it."

Hayden said military and veterans' service groups were provided with information about the board for their newsletters when the board first started taking cases. He has also seen some information released through a Defense Department news release.

"In order to reach out to make sure everyone is contacted, we think it needs to be a personal letter," Hayden said.

The Military Officers Association of America and other veterans groups drafted a joint letter urging the Defense Department and Department of Veterans Affairs to send letters to all veterans eligible for a review.

Retired Army Lt. Col. Mike Parker, an advocate for wounded soldiers, said it would be easy for the board to get the addresses of eligible veterans because most get Department of Veterans Affairs benefits.

"I personally think they are not trying to find people because the more they find, the retirements will add up," Parker said.

LoGrande said he has spoken in person to veterans groups about the board. Since there is no sunset on the board, he said the review board has time to reach out to all eligible veterans.

"This is a unique situation that we are a (Department of Defense) board that really services not active members, but former members," LoGrande said. "The best venue is to pursue it through veterans groups."

US Labor Department announces more than \$8 million grant competition to serve homeless veterans

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service has announced an \$8.3 million grant competition to provide job training, counseling and placement services (including job readiness, and literacy and skills training) to expedite the reintegration of homeless veterans into the labor force through its Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program.

"Every day, our service men and women — and their families — make tremendous sacrifices for their country. Yet a staggering share of our homeless population is made up of veterans," said Secretary of Labor Hilda L. Solis. "Reintegrating these homeless veterans into meaningful employment is a crucial step in restoring the strength of our economy. Just as important, as is the case

with all Americans, ending homelessness among those who have donned the military uniform is also the right thing to do."

HVRP grants are intended to provide services to assist in reintegrating homeless veterans into meaningful employment within the labor force and to stimulate the development of effective service delivery systems that will address the complex problems facing homeless veterans.

The Department of Labor is soliciting applicants to design programs that help eligible veterans by providing job placement services, job training, counseling, supportive services and other assistance to expedite the reintegration of homeless individuals into the labor force. Successful programs also will be flexible in addressing universal as well as local or regional problems that have had a negative impact on homeless veterans re-entering the workforce.

For more information on this solicitation, visit www.grants.gov/ and www.dol.gov/vets.