



*PROGRESS OF ACCESS TO CARE – Senate Committee Hearing 19 August 2014*

This committee hearing is convened to assess the ability of veterans in their efforts to gain healthcare through the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA). We have witnessed numerous complaints by veterans and continued criticism in the media of lengthy times for veterans to be able to even see a physician. This is only one part of a larger problem.

Many excuses and arguments have been presented in defense of the DVA. Veterans have died due to reasons as yet forthcoming. Perhaps the first question to begin with is not why did this happen but how did it happen? What were the circumstances that allowed a government agency to ignore its stated purpose? What possible gain was there in allowing veterans to die due to neglect? What reasoning is behind the continued wait times for veteran healthcare?

Criticism of the Department of Veterans Affairs is long standing. How could it have been ignored? Service organizations, individuals, in print and in letters to the DVA have spelled out countless occurrences of abuse, disregard and intolerance to veterans. A movie was made in 1992 that raised awareness of how veterans were being treated. What was done then? More recently, television programs have featured stories about veterans and their poor treatment at the hands of their own government. This committee has failed in addressing its responsibility in providing oversight to the agency it was charged to manage. The DVA has failed to follow its own mission statement laid down by President Lincoln. The focus became the bureaucracy and not the client.

The challenge today is to ensure safeguards are put in place to prevent this from happening again.

The core issue may be one of attitude. More rules and operating procedures are not going to implement better programs. It is people. It is their desire to aid others. The primary focus cannot be on maintaining the mechanics of bureaucracy. The veteran is not a piece of paper to be shuffled through a never ending corridor of administration. They are people.

It also becomes a point of frustration to the veteran who sees countless dollars spent on people who have done nothing to contribute to our society and yet cannot find the necessary funding to fulfill its obligation to those that put their lives on the line for that very same country.

There are those who have said it would take a generation to fix the problems at DVA. That is unacceptable. In our history, we have demonstrated a will and an ability



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to change things dramatically and in short order. What is preventing that from happening now?

There are far too many rules to be dealt with. Let's start from the premise that the veteran must be treated at all costs. Means tests, eligibility categories and numerous other qualifying criteria have choked the system to the point where even adequate care becomes a brass ring to the veteran.

What recourse does the veteran have? They depend on your positions to satisfy a promise made to them at the time they committed their lives. Who speaks for them? Service organizations can print articles in their journals. Movies can be made. But ultimately it falls on the government to act. It was the government in the form of Congress and the President who sent young men and women into battle. The United States Government must assume full responsibility for its actions. Those actions resulted in broken people who need to be mended. The extent of their injuries should not be a matter of debate by those who have not seen hostile action. They should not be judged by people unschooled in the experience of war. Nor should unqualified people be making medical decisions.

How can people who have no concept of what the veteran experienced pass judgment on what one writer described of their first impression of Vietnam when entering country as "a train wreck in slow motion"? Are the people who make these disability decisions qualified? Is there any training that is conducted to ensure these people understand the myriad classifications of jobs in the military? How many of them have actually been in service and/or been exposed to hostile fire?

To the veteran, the "system" has become the enemy. It has worked against them not for them. Attitudes and an environment must be changed. That comes from leadership. This however gets in the realm of being subjective. The DVA has had leadership. But what kind? Has there been unwritten policy to hinder veterans from receiving their due? The process for gaining access to healthcare is cumbersome and prohibitive. To the veteran, attempts to gain access are met with denials and obstacles made up of all manner of criteria. The paperwork alone is not only intimidating but almost ludicrous.

Consider a veteran applying for assistance due to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The question for the veteran to answer is what significant event they have experienced that caused their trauma. To the veteran who spent a tour in a combat zone, the entire experience of being there presents numerous events that can be



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documented. Over the course of a tour facing hostile fire, just being there can be enough. Not knowing when the next bullet, mortar, rocket, IED or other means of killing or maiming you is going to occur can cause stress. The concept that only one incident is the cause justifies the granting of PTSD disability seems ridiculous. Certainly one incident can induce such a condition but when spread across months or even years of exposure, how does only one incident validate the decision? Do we apply other criteria? How many times was the veteran exposed to hostile fire? How far away from the detonation of a device constitutes exposure? Does the closer one gets establish a higher rating? We all respond and react differently to the stimuli around us. Some can handle the stress of combat better than others. That still does not exclude them from having problems.

Wars are fought by people. There are no grand designs motivating soldiers on the battlefield. Training and conditioning has taught them to inflict as much damage on the enemy while surviving the chaos that is war. When their job is done or the war is over, they come home. There is no transition from the violence to what is considered normal life. There is no decompression.

What they need now is compassion and a means to recover from what they have experienced. Some are filled with anguish and many are suffering from the wounds they received. Little thought was given to the consequences of war when these people were sent into battle. Wars are fought mostly by the young and they may not yet recognize the impact on their lives from having seen destruction at close quarters. Their pain may go unnoticed for years but their actions may speak otherwise.

Governments care little for those yet to be consequences until it comes time to pay the bill for the broken lives and the life-long damage that comes from war. Agencies, administrations and other government arms may be created to respond to their needs, but as with any organization, time and a growing bureaucracy hinder the administering of aid to these warriors. The system bogs down and forgets what its purpose was. Budgets become more important than people. Survival now becomes a bureaucratic necessity, not the care of their charges. Maintenance of the system is required. It has broken down.

People may salve their conscience with bumper stickers proclaiming their support of the troops but their moral support does little in the way of mending the hurt of those that did battle for them. The voice of the people also requires maintenance. Their weapon is the ballot box.



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How many tragedies must we endure before the American people recognize the plight of the veteran? While we have seen outbursts of violence that have taken lives and received national attention, what has been done to solve the problem and not the symptom? The problem is not just with those still in uniform but with anyone that has been exposed to the horrors of war. The American people and the American government have failed to take care of their responsibility in dealing with this problem. There shouldn't be the need for non-government agencies to address the shortfalls of government.

The callousness of those who sent young men and women into an inconclusive war seems to be carried on in similar fashion with those that participated in those conflicts. It would appear the indifference exhibited by a government that would wait things out are allowing the problem to solve itself. The DVA in its own studies have stated that anywhere from 18 to 22 veterans are committing suicide each day. That is almost one every hour. A similarly shocking statistic accompanies the number of suicides experienced by active duty personnel with almost one a day.

We are terrible students of history. We entered into a war that really isn't a war. Our national resources are not focused on the complete defeat of the enemy. The average citizen is more concerned with the latest sports scores and cares little for the plight of those who are allegedly fighting for their comfort and safety. Not only is Congress to blame but so are the American people.

It was called Shell Shock in World War One, Battle Fatigue in World War Two, Operational Exhaustion in the Korean War and finally Post Traumatic Stress Disorder for Vietnam. An evolution of language that has softened the meaning and hiding a problem that has long plagued veterans of all wars. If the American people don't care why should their representatives?

How many Fort Hoods will it take to bring action to this issue as opposed to neglect? There are too many attempts at fixing the symptoms and not the root cause. Something happens to people in war. We have seen this down through the centuries and yet in our own time our best response has been to make movies and create non-government organizations to unsuccessfully lobby a deaf Congress.

Promises were made to a group of people that were trained in the art of war. They were sent to places to live in conditions that even inmates in prisons would revolt against. They have returned to an indifferent nation and a government that does little to help those in need and actively hinders veterans from acquiring what has been



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promised to them. Yet there are millions of people who have contributed nothing to the betterment of the country who take from the coffers all they can. These riches earned by others only to be used by those who believe they are entitled to whatever this government will give them. The American GI deserves more than just campaign ribbons and bumper stickers in recognition of their service.

There are programs available to veterans that are being ignored. What is preventing Congress from doing its job by implementing them? Oversight committees drag on knowing that people are dying with every hour they deliberate. This is unconscionable.

Hearings and investigative committees are not enough. It is time for action. The laws are on the books but they are being ignored. It has to do with leadership and it is not forthcoming from our government. We have only our votes and there may not be enough to influence an election but we are also the product of a lost consciousness. If anything we serve as a reminder of a failed promise. We are not the first generation to have suffered this indignity. What we must do is prevent it from happening again.

The burden of proof should be upon the Department of Veterans Affairs — but applications are denied and dismissed using the excuse of lack of evidence from the veteran. Veterans must try again or simply become frustrated and give up. Could this be a factor in the high suicide rate of veterans? Does this seem like an efficient system where more funds are expended in more review boards to deal with resubmittals?

There are good people in the DVA who are committed to the promise made by President Abraham Lincoln in his second inaugural address: "To care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and for his orphan." However, there also are those who, instead of administering to veterans, create confusion and block the efforts of veterans seeking deserved financial and medical aid. Delays in processing applications for needed assistance, or deferrals in treatment, should not be tolerated.

Hawaii's veterans have to contend with problems. Chief among them are gaining access to those things the government terms 'benefits' that were promised to them. A benefit implies a grant or allowance from a benevolent government. The assistance Hawaii's veterans' need has already been bought and paid for in blood and suffering. It is not a benefit, it is what is owed.

The Vietnam veteran is probably the most abused veteran of all wars to date. They have experienced the hostility of a public seeking a place to vent their disapproval



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of an unpopular war. They also deal with the contempt that well-established bureaucracies can achieve.

The application and review process has discouraged too many veterans who need the services promised them. The review system is so overworked that applications are being handled by other service centers on the mainland and even the Philippines. How then can Hawaii veterans make their case by meeting with a review board that is thousands of miles away?

We seek to rectify this not only for our own well-being but for those that follow us. We also recognize the issues are manifold in that more questions will surface leading to discovery of even more problems. It is the substance we seek to repair not the appearance. The returning veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq should not have to fight for their rights.

What should be of great concern to this committee is the diminished attention of the DVA once this crisis has been solved or becomes another storm that has been weathered. Continued maintenance of any system is necessary to ensure it runs correctly. How will that be accomplished with the DVA?

The system is archaic. We should not be needing non-government organizations such as Wounded Warriors, Veterans of Foreign Wars or Disabled American Veterans to plead assistance for veterans. Veterans' care should be the sole responsibility of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the department needs to do its job better. The character of a government can be measured by the way it treats its veterans. Given the current attention the DVA has received, it would appear that character requires some repair.

It is our sincere hope that this letter to the Committee Hearing is not simply included in the Congressional Record and become another missive to be forgotten. Continued negligence of veteran's issues can only fester in this society to the point where it becomes even more difficult to recruit people to defend our nation. That could represent societal suicide.