

Veterans Corner
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By: Robert G. Mitchell

VA to reopen Gulf War vets' files

The Veterans Affairs Department says it will take a second look at the disability claims of what could be thousands of Gulf War veterans suffering from illnesses they blame on their war service, the first step toward potentially compensating them nearly two decades after the war ended.

VA Secretary Eric Shinseki said the decision is part of a “fresh, bold look” his department is taking to help veterans who have what’s commonly called “Gulf War Illness” and have long felt the government did little to help them. The VA says it also plans to improve training for medical staff who work with Gulf War vets, to make sure they do not simply tell vets that their symptoms are imaginary – as has happened to many over the years.

“I’m hoping they’ll be enthused by the fact that this...challenges all the assumptions that have been there for 20 years.” Shinseki told the Associated Press in an interview.

The changes reflect a significant shift in how the VA may ultimately care for some 700,000 veterans who served in the Gulf War. They also could improve the way the department handles war-related illnesses suffered by future veterans, because Shinseki said he wants standards put in place that don’t leave veterans waiting decades for answers to what ails them.

About 175,000 to 210,000, Gulf War veterans have come down with a pattern of symptoms that include rashes, joint and muscle pain, sleep issues and gastrointestinal problems, according to a 2008 congressionally mandated committee that based the estimate on earlier studies.

The VA says it plans to review how regulations were written to ensure the veterans received the compensation they were entitled to under the law. The VA would then give veterans the opportunity to have a rejected claim reconsidered.

VA Recognizes “presumptive” illness in Iraq, Afghanistan

Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K Shinseki announced the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is taking steps to make it easier for Veterans to obtain disability compensation for certain diseases associated with service in the Persian Gulf War or Afghanistan. This will be the beginning of historic change for how VA considers Gulf War Veterans illnesses.

VA is publishing a proposed regulation in the Federal Register that will establish new presumptions of service connection for nine specific infectious diseases associated with

military service in Southwest Asia during the Persian Gulf War, or in Afghanistan on or after September 19, 2001.

The proposed rule includes information about the long-term health effects potentially associated with the nine diseases, Brucellosis, Campylobacter Jejuni, Coxiella burnetii (Q fever), Malaria, Mycobacterium tuberculosis, Nontyphoid Salmonella, shigella, Visceral leishmaniasis and West Nile virus.

With the proposed rule, a Veteran will only have to show service in Southwest Asia or Afghanistan and a current diagnosis of one of the nine diseases. For more information about health problems associated with military service during operations Desert Shield, Desert Storm, Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom and related VA programs go to www.publichealth.va.gov/exposure/gulfwar or go to www.va.gov for information about disability compensation.

Veterans urged not to delay filing 'AO' claims

Tens of thousands of Vietnam veterans with ischemic heart disease, Parkinson's disease or B cell leukemia should file claims now with the Department of Veterans Affairs for disability compensation, not wait until VA publishes a regulation officially linking these diseases to wartime service.

Advocacy groups are urging the swift filing of claim because veterans eventually found eligible for disability pay for these diseases will be able to receive compensation back to the date their claims were filed.

Those who wait for regulation to add these ailments to VA's list of disease presumed caused by exposure to Agent Orange and other toxins used in the war could lessen, by several months of compensation, any retroactive pay that they will be due once their claim has been approved. To file a claim call Bob Mitchell at 884-4115.

Reducing claims Backlog

The president's budget proposal includes an increase of \$460 million and more than 4,000 additional claims processors for Veterans benefits. This is a 27% funding increase over the 2010 level.

The 1,014,000 claims received were a 75% increase over the 579,000 received in 2000. Shinseki said the Department expects a 30% increase in claims – to 1,319,000 – in 2011 from 2009 levels.

One reason for the increase is VA's expansion of the number of Agent Orange-related illnesses that automatically qualify for disability benefits. Veterans exposed to the Agent Orange herbicides during the Vietnam War are likely to file additional claims that will have a substantial impact upon the processing system for benefits, the secretary said.

Veterans/Volunteers Needed

Saratoga National Cemetery Honor Guard is recruiting new members and is now in its 10th year. This organization provides a great service to veterans and their families. If you are interested in volunteering please contact Tom Sawyer at 583-9352 or Bill Potts at 785-8742.