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EDITORIAL: We Owe Veterans a Better VA

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DEREK PRUITT Derek Pruitt - dpruitt@poststar.com

Charles Cooley sits at his home in Fort Edward on Thursday, May 5, 2011. Cooley, a blue water veteran, served on the U.S.S. Lynde McCormick during the Vietnam War. He is currently suffering from a diabetes, heart disease, arterial disease, neuropathy in his legs and asbestosis. Cooley believes many of his ailments are related to Agent Orange exposure during his service, but because he didn't set foot on land, he is not eligible for veterans benefits.

They put their lives on the line for us.

They risk physical injury and psychological damage, all in the service of our nation. In service of us.

We owe them. We owe them our thanks. And we owe them proper care once their time of service has ended.

So why, when they come home damaged and broken, do we make life so difficult for them?

A series of articles by Will Doolittle last week spotlighted the problem of one Vietnam War veteran who was denied full benefits from damage caused by Agent Orange, the chemical defoliant and herbicide used to clear the Asian jungles. As a result of unexpected changes in policy by the Veterans Administration regarding his eligibility for benefits, the man and his wife are facing desperate financial hardship and frightening uncertainty over their ability to treat his serious health issues.

Sadly, his is not a unique story. Several other individuals came forward with their own VA horror stories after the articles were published, indicating that the problems affect many local veterans in addition to thousands and thousands of veterans nationwide.

Veterans are twice victimized - once by their service in war, then again by their treatment at home.

There are about 25 million veterans alive today, about 25 percent of whom receive benefits from the Veterans Administration. Victims of earlier wars came home sick from herbicides, having lost limbs or suffering from other undiagnosed mental issues. Today's vets are just as likely to return with post-traumatic stress syndrome and non-visible injuries such as concussions and other mental issues.

The series identified numerous problems in the Veterans Administration. It illustrated decision-making on policy or benefit awards that literally can change by the hour. It found the VA using the excuse of "every case is unique" to justify providing one benefit to one person and a completely different benefit to another. Representatives of veterans tell stories of soldiers being forced to complete dozens of pages of applications, of having to go through multiple agencies to obtain verification of their injuries, of having to wait years - often longer than the length of their service - to receive the benefits to which they're entitled. Veterans who appeal denial of their benefits often must incur significant legal expenses and wait inordinate periods of time to receive decisions that often don't go their way.

Some veterans feel that they're being victimized by cost-cutting measures, with some going so far as to assert that the VA would be happier if they'd died in battle so it wouldn't have to award benefits. A recent federal court decision echoed those concerns.

A strongly worded ruling in May by the U.S. Court of Appeals 9th Circuit on a lawsuit filed by two non-profit veterans groups outlined a host of problems that could have been prevented had Congress and the Veterans Administration been willing to address them. "The VA's unchecked incompetence has gone on long enough," the court wrote in its 104-page decision. "No more veterans should be compelled to agonize or perish while the government fails to perform its obligations."

Many efforts have been made over the years to reform the Veterans Administration, including expanding the use of computer technology, increasing veterans educational benefits, and streamlining the process for obtaining benefits.

But as far as providing a consistent, fair, efficient process for administering and providing benefits that allows due process for appeals, the reforms have fallen woefully short.

Reforming the VA won't be easy, if for no other reason than because the bureaucracy is as thick and tangled as those Asian jungles. One petition offered to President Bush in 2008 listed nearly a dozen necessary reforms.

Among them were the timely and fair adjudication of veterans' claims for compensation, legal representation at all stages of the veterans claims process, the adoption of time limits and right to counsel policies that are currently in use by the Social Security Administration for appeals, an end to the practice of "blanket denial" of administrative tort claims, the creation of oversight committees, greater control over medical professionals and greater transparency in the process.

It's not too much for our veterans to ask that they have fair and timely access to care for their physical and psychological injuries. It's something we would demand for ourselves. Why not for the people who serve and protect us on the front lines of the military?

Our representatives in Congress need to do more than just give this problem the usual lip service.

Nothing short of a major overhaul of the system will be enough.

Local editorials represent the opinion of The Post-Star editorial board, which consists of Publisher Rick Emanuel, Editor Ken Tingley, Editorial Page Editor Mark Mahoney and citizen representative Carol Merchant.

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