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## Influx of Wounded Strains VA

### Claims Backlog Besets Returning U.S. Troops

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Thousands of U.S. troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with physical injuries and mental health problems are encountering a benefits system that is already overburdened, and officials and veterans' groups are concerned that the challenge could grow as the nation remains at war.

The disability benefits and health care systems that provide services for about 5 million American veterans have been overloaded for decades and have a current backlog of more than 300,000 claims. And because they were mobilized to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan, nearly 150,000 National Guard and reservist veterans had become eligible for health care and benefits as of Aug. 1. That number is rising.

At the same time, President Bush's budget for 2005 calls for cutting the Department of Veterans Affairs staff that handles benefits claims, and some veterans report long waits for benefits and confusing claims decisions.

"I love the military; that was my life. But I don't believe they're taking care of me now," said Staff Sgt. Gene Westbrook, 35, of Lawton, Okla. Paralyzed in a mortar attack near Baghdad in April, he has received no disability benefits because his paperwork is missing. He is supporting his wife and three children on his regular military pay of \$2,800 a month as he awaits a ruling on whether he will receive \$6,500 a month from the VA for his disability.

Through the end of April, the most recent accounting the VA could provide, a total of 166,334 veterans of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan had separated from military service, and 26,633 -- 16 percent -- had filed benefits claims with the VA for service-connected disabilities. Less than two-thirds of those claims had been processed, leaving more than 9,750 recent veterans waiting.

Officials expect those numbers to increase as the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan continues.

"I think we're doing okay now, but I am worried," VA Secretary Anthony J. Principi said in a recent interview. "It is something you have to be concerned about. We don't have a good handle on the extent to which the demand for care and benefits will be a year or five years from now."

Principi acknowledged that one of the most challenging elements of providing for recently returned veterans is the disconnect between the Defense Department and the VA. His department has been working to streamline the process, he said, placing VA staff members at 136 bases across the country and at military medical centers.

But people such as Westbrook still fall into a no-man's land.

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Westbrook was deployed to Iraq in January as a drill sergeant, sent to train Iraqi army recruits. While on duty April 28 south of Sadr City in Baghdad, he was hit by a mortar shell, and the shrapnel severed his spine. He is now paralyzed from the chest down, has limited movement in his right arm, and battles constant infections. His wife takes care of him full time.

Though Westbrook praises the way the Army has treated him since his injury, including providing excellent medical care, he has struggled to make it on his regular pay since he returned July 14. "They're supposed to expedite the process, and they have not done that," he said, adding that officers in his Army unit have been trying in vain to help. Charities have been set up in his honor to help defray costs.

"It's very draining, because I don't know what to do, and my family is asking when we'll get the money," he said. "It's the hardest part about this whole thing."

What injured or ill veterans are finding when they return from overseas is a complex set of government processes for reviewing whether they will receive financial help. They have to navigate two of the largest U.S. government bureaucracies in the VA and the Pentagon, and multiple medical review boards assess the extent of their injuries.

Even with the current backlog and the prospect of staffing cuts, VA officials are trying to increase the department's visibility, reaching out to new veterans to make sure they are aware of the services they can receive and urging them to apply.

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