

AT EASE



Vietnam Veterans of America Central New York Chapter #103
P.O. Box 675, Liverpool, NY 13088
www.cnyvva103.org

March 2008

VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA
CHAPTER #103
P.O. BOX 675. LIVERPOOL, NY 13088
(315) 458-1323
WWW.CNYVVA103.ORG

2008

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SYRACUSE VET CENTER
478-7127

BUFFALO REGIONAL
OFFICE
1-800-827-1000

The website of the New York State Council of Vietnam Veterans of America is

Sue Doan, our State Veterans Counselor, has the following address:

Sue Doan
State Veteran Counselor
State Office Bldg. 4th Floor
333 E. Washington Street
Syracuse, NY 13202

If any veteran has a question or problem that needs to be addressed, give Sue a call at 428-4046 at the State Office Building. She helped many veterans last year, especially through referrals from members of this chapter. The Iraqi/Afghan vets we've helped send to her are very thankful to Sue for watching out for them.

March Notes

1) Annual elections held Thursday March 20th. See next months **At Ease** for winners.

2) We continue to tape program for our Veterans Issues program, which is televised every Wednesday evening at 1800 hours on T/W cable channel 98--we'd like to hear back from you to let us know you are watching.

3) The program Gordy and Pete to help veterans who run afoul of the law continues to gain traction with law enforcement and the courts. The Syracuse VA Medical Center has committed to support it 100%.

4) Annual installation and awards banquet will be April 12, 2008 at the Liverpool Elks Lodge. Call Dick Madden to put you name(s) down for reservations--you can pay at the door--but we need you get on the list so we can get a head count for the cooks. Price is same as last year @\$20.00 members, \$25.00 for spouse or guest.

Church of the Most Holy Rosary
111 Roberts Ave.
Syracuse, New York 13207
478-5749

February 28, 2008

Thank you so very much for making a gift to Most Holy Rosary. Your gift in memory of Ann Davis, is a thoughtful expression of sympathy which is truly appreciated.

Your name has been forwarded to the family of Ann Davis so that they will know of your thoughtfulness.

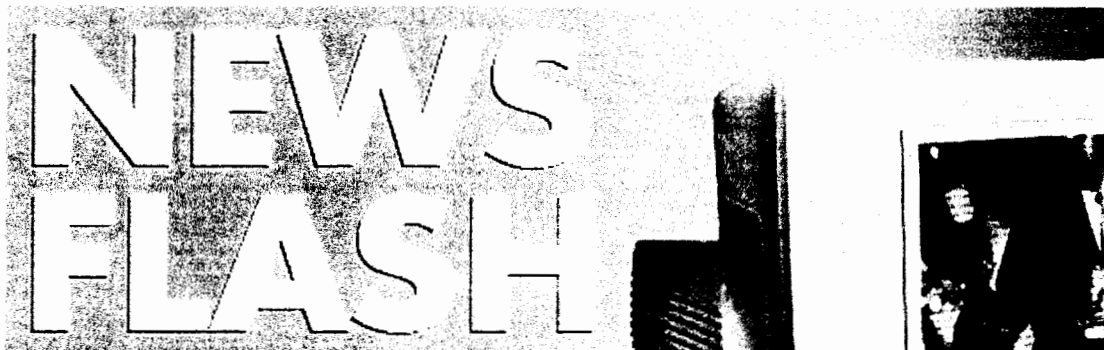
As always, if you have any questions, please feel free to call me at the rectory (315) 478-5749. Thanks again for you gift to Most Holy Rosary.

Sincerely,

Father Fred Mannara
Pastor

*Thank you all Veterans
on your kind gift
to Most Holy Rosary
Father Fred*

Subj: **Internal Revenue Service**
Date: **3/4/2008 9:16:47 AM Eastern Standard Time**
From: **SPD179RET@adl.com**
To: **SPD179RET@adl.com**



Internal Revenue Service

NOTICE

Department of the Treasurer
Internal Revenue Services
www.irs.gov

Did you receive Disability Compensation, Pension or Survivor's Benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs?

Even if you are not otherwise required to file a tax return, you may qualify for an economic stimulus payment from the federal government!

WHAT YOU COULD GET: You could receive a payment of \$300 for you, or \$600 if you are married and file a joint tax return with your spouse. If you have a dependent child, the payment may receive an additional \$300 for each qualifying child. To get the full details, see page 17 as of December 31, 2007.

WHAT YOU NEED TO DO: All you have to do to get the stimulus payment is file a 2007 IRS Form 1040 or Form 1040A and report at least \$3,000 in qualifying income. You must also include the amount of your VA benefits to qualify for the stimulus payment.

QUALIFYING INCOME: Add the amount of your VA disability, pension or survivors benefits to any other qualifying income you have to reach the \$3,000 threshold. Other qualifying income would include wage earnings or Social Security benefits.

WHAT YOU WILL GET: Enter your name, address, Social Security number and filing status on the form. Then just enter the amount of VA and Social Security benefits you received on the line of the Form 1040A or line 2a of Form 1040. You can separate the VA benefits from VA or the Social Security Administration by taking the monthly amount you received from VA and multiplying it by the number of months you received payments. If you need to find out how much you need to reach the \$3,000 qualifying level, enter that amount on line 7 of Form 1040. For more information, you should write the

words "Stimulus Payment" at the top of the 1040A or 1040

IS THE STIMULUS PAYMENT TAXABLE NEXT YEAR? No!


WILL THIS PAYMENT AFFECT THE AMOUNT OF VA BENEFITS YOU RECEIVE? No!

WHEN WILL I RECEIVE MY PAYMENT? For those who file a 2007 tax return, IRS will begin mailing checks in May.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: In late March 2008, the IRS will mail a packet of information to recipients of VA benefits who did not file a tax return last year.

The packet will contain guidance to help you claim the stimulus payment. If you need information in the interim, you can visit the IRS web site at www.irs.gov

If you no longer wish to receive e-mail from us, you can unsubscribe [here](#)

powered by  eXc

From: Paul Sullivan [mailto:paul@veteransforcommonsense.org]
Sent: Monday, February 18, 2008 10:23 PM
To: Paul Sullivan
Subject: Major Victory for Veterans on VA PTSD Claims, Thanks to Sen. Akaka

Dear Friends,

VCS awaits the exact details from VA regarding the implementation of this substantial change we first proposed in July 2007.

Best, Paul Sullivan.

http://www.airforcetimes.com/news/2008/02/military_ptsdproof_080218w

PTSD victims no longer need to prove trauma

By Kelly Kennedy - Staff writer

Posted : Monday Feb 18, 2008 16:45:50 EST

The Veterans Affairs Department has dumped a policy requiring combat vets to verify in writing that they have witnessed or experienced a traumatic event before filing a claim for post-traumatic stress disorder, said the chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee.

"This change provides a fairer process for veterans with service-connected PTSD," Sen. Daniel Akaka, D-Hawaii, said in a written statement. It "leaves claim adjudicators more time to devote to reducing the staggering backlog of veterans' claims."

In the past, a veteran has had to provide written verification — a statement from a commander or doctor, or testimony from co-workers — that he or she was involved in a traumatic situation in order to receive disability compensation for PTSD from VA. The Defense Department uses the same rules in evaluating PTSD for disability retirement pay.

Importance: High

This was shared by IRS. You may want to be aware of this and pass this on to veterans within your organizations or those seeking assistance from your organizations. The contact information is:

Richard Keeling
Senior Tax Analyst - Internal Revenue Service
Stakeholder Partnerships, Education and Communication (SPEC)
Office-404.338.8814 Fax-404.338.8664
401 West Peachtree Street NW
Stop WI-53
Atlanta, GA 30308
richard.keeling@irs.gov
<http://www.irs.gov/> (Keyword - "Community Network")

Laura B. Balun
Director, Voluntary Service Office
202-461-7300 (NEW ##)

From: Keeling Richard [mailto:richard.keeling@irs.gov]
Sent: Thursday, March 13, 2008 10:52 AM
To: Keeling Richard
Subject: Economic Stimulus Payments call for National Organizations
Importance: High

Hello,

The National Disability Institute (NDI) and IRS/SPEC will co-host a call regarding the Economic Stimulus Payments on Wednesday March 19 at 2:00 PM Eastern time. You are invited to participate in this "Call to Action" teleconference call to discuss the Economic Stimulus Act of 2008, signed into law in February and the effect it has on people with disabilities who receive public benefits.

We are concerned that a number of people with disabilities that are not required to file a tax return will not receive their deserved stimulus payments and we want to provide you with the information that you can distribute to your networks. For example, someone on SSI with earned income of \$3,000 or more is eligible for a stimulus payment of at least \$300 but may not know this because they do not have a requirement to file a tax return. The only way to receive stimulus payments is to have "qualified income" of at least \$3,000 and file a 2007 tax return. Similarly, Social Security recipients, certain Railroad retirees, and those who receive veterans' benefits must file a 2007 return in order to notify the IRS of their qualifying income and receive their stimulus payments.

Please join us for this important call with your questions. There will be experts from the IRS and NDI to answer your questions.

Please see the attachment for call-in information.

If you have any questions, please call or email me.

Richard Keeling
Senior Tax Analyst - Internal Revenue Service
Stakeholder Partnerships, Education and Communication (SPEC)

Monday, March 17, 2008 America Online: SPD179RET

NEWS FROM...CHAIRMAN BOB FILNER

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

February 28, 2008

<http://veterans.house.gov>

House Veterans' Affairs Health Subcommittee Explores Expanding Mental Health Services for Families of Veterans

Washington, D.C. - On Thursday, the House Veterans' Affairs Health Subcommittee, led by Chairman Michael H. Michaud, (D-ME), conducted a hearing on access to mental health treatment for families of veterans within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Specifically, the hearing focused on the current authority of the VA to provide mental health services and how this authority should be expanded.

"Mental health issues are at the forefront of this Subcommittee's agenda, and for good reason," said Chairman Michaud. "Of the approximately 300,000 veterans from Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom who have accessed VA health care, more than 40 percent have presented with mental health concerns, including post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse and mood disorders. Veterans' mental health conditions not only affect the returning veterans, but also have a significant impact on their families. Living with and caring for veterans with mental health concerns is stressful and can change the way that families relate to one another."

Currently, VA is authorized to provide mental health services to family members of service-connected veterans when an enrolled veteran is receiving health care for a service-connected disability and the services provided to family members are considered necessary in connection with the veterans care. Under current authority, these services may include consultation, professional counseling, and training. For veterans being treated for a nonservice-related disability, the VA can only provide mental health services to family members when the services are necessary in connection with the veterans care and only if the services are initiated during the veteran's hospitalization and is essential to permit the discharge of the veteran from the hospital.

continued on back 

"The mental health care and well-being of returning service members and their families has been a top priority for this Congress," said Bob Filner (D-CA), Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs. "Current reports indicate that 42 percent of the service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are in need of mental health care. Reports also indicate that suicide rates are on the rise at an alarming pace. There is a need for programs that are designed to reintegrate the service member, along with their family, back into the community after a tour of duty."

Witnesses testified that veterans commonly rely on Vet Centers which provide readjustment counseling and outreach services to all veterans who served in any combat zone. Services are also available for their family members for military related issues. VA currently has 209 Vet Centers and is looking to expand to 232 by the end of 2008. Witnesses noted that many Vet Centers were understaffed and in need of more counselors and therapists. Kristin Day of the Office of Patient Care Services at the VHA said, "In locations where a Vet Center does not have staff with expertise in family counseling, our teams provide clinical assessments, preventive behavioral health education, basic counseling, and referrals to local VA or other qualified family counselors in the community. These Vet Centers are well-networked with local human service providers."

"While the VA is working hard to care for veterans with mental health needs, too often families of these veterans are neglected," said Chairman Michaud. "Spouses, children and parents of veterans have been affected by this conflict, yet oftentimes they do not have access to treatment which may help them. Today we heard a variety of possible ways that Congress might expand VA's current authority to provide mental health treatment to families of veterans. Our goal is to provide improved care for our veterans and their families."

The opening statements of all the witnesses are available on the Committee website at

<http://veterans.house.gov/hearings/hearing.aspx?newsid=186>

Syracuse University leads new national partnership of four major universities to support veterans with disabilities Tuesday, February 19, 2008

The year 2007 was the most violent for American troops serving in Iraq and Afghanistan in support of operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. The number of soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines wounded in the war on terror is now nearly 40,000. Further, the number of soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress and other psychological challenges resulting from their service suggests the number of Americans disabled supporting military operations since 9/11 has exceeded 100,000. For many of these Americans, traditional employment may represent a lifelong challenge.

Throughout American history, entrepreneurship has been a means for veterans to make a way for themselves and their families, and to re-engage the economic engine of their communities and ultimately the nation. Business ownership offers veterans the opportunity to "own their futures" while also offering the flexibility to accommodate the unique challenges associated with a service-connected disability.

Building on an innovative program created in 2007 by Syracuse University to expand the reach of educational programs in entrepreneurship available to veterans, the Whitman School of Management at Syracuse University will lead a nationwide partnership with the UCLA Anderson School of Management, Mays Business School at Texas A&M University and Florida State University's College of Business to offer cutting-edge training in entrepreneurship and small business management to veterans with disabilities. This consortium represents one of the first, significant partnerships since WWII among some of the country's most prestigious business schools focused specifically on opening the doors of America's colleges and universities to veterans motivated by business ownership.

The consortium is an extension of SU's Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans with Disabilities (EBV) program, first developed and offered by the Department of Entrepreneurship and Emerging Enterprises in the Whitman School. The inaugural EBV program took place in summer 2007 at SU and enrolled 20 veterans with disabilities resulting from their support of military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The EBV integrates world-class faculty, entrepreneurs, disability experts and business professionals in an educational program focused on training veterans in the competencies associated with small business ownership.

"Syracuse University and the Whitman School are proud to lead this new nationwide partnership," says SU Chancellor and President Nancy Cantor. "By expanding our innovative Bootcamp program across the nation, we will provide disabled men and women who have served abroad the resources and training to help them follow and pursue their dreams as they rejoin their communities at home."

The four-university EBV partnership will dramatically expand the ability to offer this valuable program to veterans with disabilities. At all four institutions, the EBV curriculum will be standardized, ensuring that all participants receive a consistent, high-quality experience.

"This consortium is an important and meaningful extension of the EBV program offered at the

Whitman School and is the only academic partnership of its kind aimed at this unique group of American citizens," says Melvin T. Stith, dean of the Whitman School of Management and a former U.S. Army captain. "On behalf of all of the four participating national universities, we are proud that institutes of higher education are stepping in to fill what is clearly a void for these veterans."

The EBV program is offered in three phases. Phase I is a self-study session in which the veterans complete courses through online discussions moderated by university faculty. Phase II requires that participants travel to their participating EBV university, where they will become immersed in a nine-day residency, learning to develop their own business concepts and understanding the basic elements of small business management. Phase III involves 12 months of ongoing support and mentorship provided to the veterans from the faculty experts at the EBV universities. Throughout the EBV experience, students engage in experimental workshops to write business plans, raise capital, attract customers, and develop a marketing strategy that is most effective for their business model.

The EBV curriculum will be taught by world-class entrepreneurship faculty and expert guest speakers. For the participating veterans, the program will be entirely free, including travel and accommodations.

"By offering veterans with disabilities the tools to create and grow their own businesses, we are helping them fight yet another battle — the battle for their own economic freedom," says Mike Haynie, assistant professor of entrepreneurship in the Whitman School, creator of the EBV and a former U.S. Air Force major. "There is, perhaps, no better way to thank them for their extraordinary service than to demonstrate our confidence in their bright futures."

Applications for the EBV are accepted on a rolling admissions basis, which means application for the program is always open. However, while there are no application deadlines, admission is on a first-come, first-served basis. Early application is encouraged. To create disability-related curriculum and assist participants in understanding and leveraging programs at the intersection of disability and entrepreneurship, the EBV is offered in collaboration with SU's Burton Blatt Institute, which seeks to advance the civic, economic and social participation of persons with disabilities.

To apply, or for more information, visit <http://whitman.syr.edu/ebv> or contact the Dean's Office in the Whitman School of Management at (315) 443-8736 or EBVinfo@syr.edu.
Tuesday, March 18, 2008 America Online: SPD179RET

The Buffalo News

Tuesday, January 29, 2008

Home

FOCUS: WAR VETERANS

The new Veterans Court helps vets in trouble get back on track

By Lou Michel - News Staff Reporter

Updated: 01/12/08 9:16 AM



Derek Gee/Buffalo News
Vietnam War veteran Melvin Sharp, left, participated in a pilot Veterans Court program assisted by Gulf War veteran Peter Knauber, center, and presided over by Buffalo City Judge Robert T. Russell Jr., right.

A small army of veterans advocates is putting the finishing touches on what is believed to be the country's first Veterans Court, where military veterans having problems adjusting to civilian life will get special attention.

The goal is to intercept troubled veterans before they plunge further into an already overwhelmed criminal justice system, which lacks the resources to help them get their lives back on track.

"Rather than be reactionary, we thought if we could be proactive, we could design a system that would better serve our community, the veterans and their families," said Buffalo City Court Judge Robert T. Russell Jr., who will preside over Veterans Court when it starts Tuesday.

In some ways, this court is similar to the Drug Court and Mental Health Court that Russell already supervises, offering defendants a chance to wipe the slate clean and avoid time behind bars so long as mandated treatment programs are followed.

The Veterans Court, operating in Buffalo City Court, will be open to all Erie County veterans who commit

nonviolent offenses, even if the crimes occur outside city limits.

That's because judges in other jurisdictions have the option of referring veterans to this special court.

And there's no question of the need. A recent study determined more than 300 area veterans, many of them who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, entered the criminal justice system in 2007.

The move to create the new court for veterans was praised by West Huddleston, president of the National Association of Drug Courts in Alexandria, Va.

"It's certainly the first designated veterans court in the United States, and it is a step in the right direction for veterans with post-traumatic stress, emotional and mental health issues," Huddleston said, adding that the local judicial system is recognizing that these individuals, who sometimes turn to drugs and alcohol, require "help not punishment."

Court officials here said that historically the criminal justice system has not done well with returning war veterans.

"Vietnam vets did not have this kind of service. The system was ill-prepared, and we're hoping to learn from our mistakes," said Henry G. Pirowski, a former Marine, social worker and project director for City Court.

Working with Pirowski on establishing the court, which will be in session every Tuesday, are Jack O'Connor and David Mann, co-founders of the Western New York Veterans Project.

Veterans need the special judicial attention, said Mann, who also works as a Buffalo police lieutenant.

"Nationally, we're seeing an increase of domestic violence, child abuse and neglect among veterans. We also know that there are higher rates of drug and alcohol abuse, which sometimes leads to arrests," Mann said.

In this mix of behavior, Pirowski said, are war-related psychological wounds.

"There's a lot of self-medication with drugs and alcohol, and when you throw in post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injuries, it's a formula for failure and unacceptable behavior," he said.

Compounding the problem, Pirowski said, is that the veterans who need the help the most are the least likely to find it on their own.

"They have a warrior mentality. Treatment is for the weak, and so they don't seek it," he said.

But part of the message in Veterans Court is that there is no shame in accepting help. And the help will be comprehensive, going beyond drug and alcohol treatment and counseling from mental health experts:

- Homeless veterans will be placed in lodging.
- Unemployed veterans will receive job training and education at Erie Community College.
- Volunteer mentors will be assigned to work with the offending veterans.

"What we hear a lot in court is that 'no one understands me,' 'they don't know how I feel,' and 'I no longer fit in,'" Pirowski said.

That won't be the case in Veterans Court.

"We have close to 20 veterans who are volunteering as mentors to help them readjust to civilian life," Russell said. "It's amazing to see how one veteran talking to another veteran can help in encouraging treatment."

The judge witnessed this first hand through a pilot program of Veterans Court over the last year, in which more than 160 veterans, many from Iraq and Afghanistan, were assisted. But not all were from the latest wars.

Melvin Sharp is a Vietnam War vet, who wound up being committed to psychiatric treatment 54 times in the years following his return home from war in 1969.

The 60-year-old Cheektowaga man was able to avoid jail through the pilot program and received help.

"I started with illegal drugs in Vietnam, and when I came home, it led to a lot of criminal activity," Sharp said.

"Mentally, I cracked up in the 1980s, but through divine intervention for 17 years after that. I was able to kick the heroin and cocaine."

That lasted until two years ago, when his life unraveled.

"I fell in with bad company and started using crack cocaine," he said.

One of his relatives spoke with Russell's office, and Sharp became one of the first to enter the pilot program. Since then, he has been attending a veterans support group in North Buffalo three times a week and has remained drug free.

That has allowed him to address other mental health issues that he tried to bury through drug use.

"Your eyes are opened to a much larger perspective and basically you see that the drugs were sheltering and hindering you," Sharp said of his newfound sobriety.

No one knows the plight of troubled war veterans better than Peter Knauber, an Army Reservist from the first Gulf War. He will serve as the Veterans Court care coordinator, a job he already performs in the Drug and Mental Health courts.

Upon returning home from the 1991 war, Knauber, now 44, drank heavily and eventually turned to drugs.

He repeatedly sought help, but nothing worked until he was sent to Drug Court.

"It wasn't that I just wanted to get out of trouble. I wanted to stop using," Knauber said.

With court oversight, he succeeded in remaining focused and accountable. The result has been seven years drug free, a four-year college degree, and employment as care coordinator assigned to Russell's staff.

Knauber along with counselors from the Department of Veterans Affairs in Buffalo and other agencies say they plan to link veterans with the services that will help rebuild their lives.

And for those who embrace the second chance offered by Veterans Court, the prospects of staying out of trouble with the law are better than those of the typical criminal.

"The overall national average for recidivism is 60 to 80 percent. With vets we've worked with informally over the last three years, the rate has been 4 percent," Pirowski said. And there's another big plus.

Dr. Terri Julian, manager of the VA's post-traumatic stress residential program in Batavia, says this type of early intervention will save lives that might otherwise be destroyed.

"If we can introduce opportunities for a healthier alternative, like treatment to deal with emotional problems and alcohol problems, then we are doing the veteran a service and society as well," Julian said. There's no disagreement on that point.

Pirowski says that while the criminal justice system lacks the resources to treat veterans, it will make a difference with the Veterans Court. "In the old days it was search and destroy," said Pirowski, referring to his military service and that of other vets. "Now it's identify and help."

lmichel@buffnews.com

Subj: **FW: [NPR, 02/07/2008] Army SG denied Army told VA folks at Ft Drum to stop helping soldiers with disability paperwork. NPR nails SG with day after memo to the contrary.**
Date: 2/8/2008 4:28:07 PM Eastern Standard Time
From: rweidman@vva.org
To: martinj@assembly.state.ny.us, hodwa@adelphia.net, spd179ret@aol.com

From: Mike Gaffney [mailto:dclaw@radix.net]
Sent: Friday, February 08, 2008 2:09 AM
To: Rick Weidman
Cc: Bernie Edelman; David Houppert; Mokie Porter
Subject: [NPR, 02/07/2008] Army SG denied Army told VA folks at Ft Drum to stop helping soldiers with disability paperwork. NPR nails SG with day after memo to the contrary.

Rick,

The incident at Fort Drum happened March 30, 2007. The memo that shows Army officials at Fort Drum told VA workers at Ft Drum to stop helping soldiers with disability paperwork is dated March 31, 2007. This NPR story was February 7, 2008. When confronted with the memo, Army SG says "Isn't that amazing? It sort of speaks to miscommunication, doesn't it?" [No, general, it speaks to false information from the Army, which is not at all "amazing."]

NPR reporter says "**people at the VA and Fort Drum have told me that in that year, they have not offered the same advice they had been offering prior to the Tiger Team's visit.**" If ratings for soldiers from Fort Drum declined significantly after they were "**not offered the same advice**" as before, some may have been shafted. Don't know how many soldiers from Fort Drum have been given disability ratings since March 31, 2007. Unclear whether "the disability paperwork" refers to paperwork for military disability retirement or paperwork for VA disability benefits. Nothing said about whether the Army intends to do any follow up. My guess is: Army will do nothing about it unless forced to. Might the member in whose district Fort Drum is located be interested? Or a NY Senator? Can't tell how many of the soldiers were/are NY residents and constituents. Maybe a GAO look see rather than Army denials? Steve Robinson to stir the pot?

Mike

Army Surgeon General Eric Schoomaker explains why last week, he denied — incorrectly — that Army officials had told VA workers at Fort Drum to stop helping soldiers with disability paperwork.

Audio link: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=18788808>

Army Blames 'Miscommunication' in Fort Drum Flap

by Ari Shapiro

NPR, February 7, 2008

All Things Considered, February 7, 2008 · The Army Surgeon General says he was mistaken when he denied that the Army had told the Veterans Affairs Department not to help injured soldiers challenge their disability ratings.

VA spokesmen told NPR last week that an Army team sent to Fort Drum in New York to review disability issues had told the VA office there to stop helping the soldiers, to leave that to others. Soldiers said the VA had helped them get better disability ratings, and they felt that the Army was damaging their cases by cutting off that assistance.

Army Surgeon General Eric B. Schoomaker says the whole thing was a misunderstanding, and it is fine for the VA to help

Top Army Doctor Responds to Fort Drum Flap

The Army's top doctor responded on Thursday to brewing controversy over benefits for disabled soldiers at Fort Drum Army base in upstate New York. At a briefing with reporters, Army Surgeon General Eric B. Schoomaker explained why last week, he denied that Army officials told workers at the Department of Veterans Affairs at Fort Drum to stop helping injured soldiers with medical paperwork that can determine health care and disability benefits.

Earlier Thursday, NPR had first reported the details of a memo that contradicted the surgeon general's original account. The document summarizes a meeting at Fort Drum between VA workers and members of what the Army calls a "Tiger Team" — an ad-hoc group assigned to investigate, in this case, medical-disability benefits.

According to the memo, one member of the Tiger Team told the VA not to counsel soldiers on their disability benefits because "there exists a conflict of interest." Schoomaker told reporters Thursday that he apologized for his earlier, incorrect assertion that the Army surgeon general's office had not counseled VA officials on the matter.

"There obviously was some miscommunication," he said.

After the briefing, Schoomaker sat down with NPR's Ari Shapiro for an interview. A transcript of their conversation follows:

SHAPIRO: You said you were surprised to hear the stories about Fort Drum. Tell me why.

SCHOOMAKER: First of all, we got a pretty thorough report back, a summary of what that Tiger Team did when they went around to about 11 different hospitals, installations to study the comprehensive care and rehabilitation and transition into the VA, and that was not reported back as a problem or an issue. It also didn't jibe with what I knew personally about the relationship between our medical evaluation board and physical evaluation board process, the whole physical disability evaluation system and our relationship with the VA.

We have always encouraged competent counseling for our soldiers. We have no policy that denies them access to any counselor. So it just didn't make sense to me. And then when I spoke to members of the team that went up there, they had no recollection of that having been a part of their exchanges. In fact, their recollection and their re-creation of that visit up to Fort Drum was very, very positive. They were very laudatory of what the veterans benefits advisers were doing for our soldiers up there. They felt in many cases it was almost a best practice, and they came back with some recommendations for how we ought to embrace — even more thoroughly — the provision of knowledge about benefits at discharge for any soldier leaving the Army. So it just — it wasn't what I'd experienced. It wasn't what I knew from personal experience was being done within our disability evaluation process. And that was validated by the people that I spoke with.

What was so surprising was that the people you spoke with gave you an account that not only was different from the account in these documents and [from] others I've spoken with, but that almost could not have been more opposite.

A: I know. Isn't that amazing? It sort of speaks to miscommunication, doesn't it?

And so were those conversations with members of the team the basis for your statements last week that the Army did not tell the VA to stop helping soldiers with their medical disability paperwork?

Absolutely. I spoke to members who were there, present at the meetings. They had no recollection of our directing the VA one way or the other. In fact, as I said before, their recollection of the events was very, very positive. And since we don't have authority to direct the VA one way or the other, I felt pretty confident in saying to both to Army leadership, as well as members of Congress, that this wasn't how it came down. Had I had the memorandum that has later surfaced, I quickly would've recognized there was a miscommunication here. Clearly, at least one of the veterans benefits advisers in the room heard something differently, and I think that would've been a reason to immediately go back and try to correct the miscommunication or the misinformation.

Looking at the memorandum, it's pretty explicit. And reading it, it's hard to see how there can be this miscommunication. According to this memo, Col. Baker said Veterans Benefits should discontinue counseling, there was a "conflict of interest." Later in the briefing, apparently, Kevin Esslinger from the Veterans Affairs Department repeated back to Col. Baker what he'd perceived her as saying and said, "We'll discontinue this practice." This document was written the day after the meeting.

A: That's when it's dated.

The document is dated Saturday, March 31 about the meeting that took place Friday, March 30.

A: All I can say is I wish I had seen this. I wish the team had seen this. I wish this had been shared with the team on the same day that it was written, so that we would've seen clearly what their perception of things — we've all seen experiences where different observers of the same event report it in different ways, and I think this might be one of those

examples, and it's unfortunate. This is an object lesson for us all that, as we're doing things to encourage communication across these boundaries, we need to be very forthcoming about what we hear and make sure we're all in agreement.

Let me add one more time: The important thing here is, we encourage and welcome any help that these soldiers and their families can receive from competent, well-informed people. We have no policy, we have absolutely no initiative to keep the best advice from coming to our soldiers and their families. And if this exchange that took place in March — and if my earlier, obviously not-as-well-informed refutation of that account — in any way has broken down support, then I am very sorry. I want to get the best advice for our soldiers and their families we can possibly get.

What do you say to these people who've had less help with their paperwork because of what you've described as a misunderstanding?

A: So far — you're giving me new information, I wasn't aware that anyone has not gotten the best advice. If anyone out there feels that they didn't get the best advice, they need to come forward and let us know about that.

Some of these people have been through the disability process and finished. The ratings are done. If they had a chance to appeal — they may have or may not have — but they're now out of the Army. It's been a year since this meeting took place, and people at the VA and Fort Drum have told me that in that year, they have not offered the same advice they had been offering prior to the Tiger Team's visit.

A: This is all information I'm not privy to. I'll be happy to go back and re-look at it.

Is there anything you'd like to say to the VA team at Fort Drum now?

A: I think it was the message we tried to convey a year ago, which is, "Hey, thanks for helping our soldiers. You're doing a terrific job. We think that the practices and behaviors exhibited is among the best we've seen. We want to encourage you to continue to help us, and we're very grateful for the assistance you're providing our warriors and our families."

VA's New "Travel Nurse Program" Hits the Road

Program Offsets Personnel Losses, Improves Quality

WASHINGTON (March 11, 2008) To deal with a nationwide shortage of nurses and to improve the quality of care for veterans, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has created a "Travel Nurse Corps" to enable VA nurses to travel and work throughout the Department's medical system.

"VA is committed to putting health care facilities closer to veterans," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Dr. James B. Peake. "The Travel Nurse Corps will make it easier to bring our world-class health care professionals closer to veterans, too. And it will make it easier for us to shift personnel during times of crisis."

The Travel Nurse Corps, headquartered at the Phoenix VA Health Care System, is beginning as a three-year pilot program. Initially, it will place as many as 75 nurses at VA medical centers across the country. The goals of the program are to improve recruitment, decrease turnover of experienced nurses and maintain high standards of medical care.

Under the program, participating nurses may be temporarily assigned to distant medical centers and clinics to help nursing staffs that have vacancies, reduce wait times or the reliance upon contractors, or to maintain high-skill services and procedures.

On February 20, the Department announced plans to create a Rural Health Care Advisory Committee to enhance VA services to veterans in rural areas. The Travel Nurse Corps will work with this national VA panel to support VA health care in rural areas.

"Those who join the VA Travel Nurse Corps will become key members of a talented group of professionals who are dedicated to providing the best care possible to our nation's veterans," said Cathy Rick, R.N., VA's chief nursing officer. "The program helps VA medical facilities address supplemental staffing needs while also ensuring there is a continued commitment to quality and safety."

Those who become VA travel nurses are compensated for their time on duty and their travel. They also receive standard government per diem allowances, which include lodging, meals and incidental. "This program is competitive with the private sector. VA has state-of-the-art facilities, high-tech computer systems and professional colleagues second to none," said Jacqueline Jackson, Travel Nurse Corps director at Phoenix VA Health Care System.

The program is also designed to establish a potential pool for national emergencies and serve as a model for an expanded VA travel corps with nurses who have varying specialties. The program is designed to reduce the use of contracted nurses, thus preserving resources that can be used elsewhere to care for veterans.

To learn more about VA's Travel Nurse Corps, visit the website at www.travelnurse.va.gov, e-mail: travelnurse@va.gov or call toll free at (866) 664-1030 or in Phoenix at (602) 200-2398.

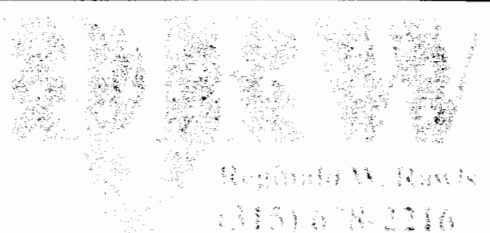
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VVA Chapter #103 holds its meetings at American Legion Post 188, 205 Cypress St., Liverpool, NY on the 3rd Thursday of each month at 7:00 p.m.

Directions: From Heid's Corners, follow signs to Rt. 370 (2nd Street). Take first left past Washington Park. The Post is on your right side, across from the park.