

SOAR AND VETERANS: AN IMPORTANT CONNECTION

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VETERANS BENEFITS: AN OVERVIEW

- ◇ Disability benefits: “Paid to veterans who have disabilities from injuries and illnesses that were incurred during, or aggravated by, active duty military service” (CRS report, 6/08). The amount is determined by the veteran’s disability rating, from 10-100%.
- ◇ Veterans’ Pensions: Are “means-tested” cash benefits paid to veterans who served during a war and are permanently and totally disabled from non-service connected causes or are over 65 years of age. Also paid to survivors of such veterans (CRS report, 6/08).
- ◇ Health Benefits: Require enrollment. Eligibility generally based on previous military service, disability and income. For OEF/OIF veterans, must enroll from active duty discharge to receive free VA medical care for a period of 5 years for conditions that are or may be related to their combat service.

CURRENT PROBLEMS AND ISSUES

- ◇ Complicated transition from accessing care with DOD to care with VA.
- ◇ Lengthy disability evaluation process at VA. Non-eligibility if disability is deemed to have no link to service-connectedness. If rating is low, benefits are quite limited in amount.
- ◇ Backlog estimated at 400,000 pending claims including 83,000 that have been waiting 6 months or more (IAVA, 2008)
- ◇ Homeless veterans: NAEH reports that, in 2006, approximately 196,000 veterans were homeless on a given night. NAEH also estimates that roughly 26% of the homeless population is veterans. (NAEH, 2007)

HOW SOAR CAN ASSIST

- ◇ Influx of returning veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan will likely mean increased burden on VA system to process claims and likely create an even greater backlog. While veterans are waiting for VA benefits, they could access SSA benefits.
- ◇ Veterans who receive only a partial disability rating and have low VA benefits may also have supplemental SSA benefits. SSA has made a commitment to expedite the applications of veterans.

- ◇ Especially as National Guard and Reservists return home and face foreclosures and loss of housing because of reduced income while on active duty, the number of homeless veterans is likely to increase. SOAR outreach can assist these veterans with accessing VA services, benefits, SSA benefits, and community resources not available through the VA.
- ◇ Veterans do not have to wait for a determination from the VA regarding benefits eligibility before applying through SSA. They simply need to show that they've applied.
- ◇ SOAR could potentially integrate into its training curriculum a module on VA benefits so that case managers are aware of how the two systems link and who's eligible for what. This would require funding but is very possible.
- ◇ Long-term homelessness can be reduced or prevented if SOAR programs can reach out to veterans who are homeless currently or at-risk of homelessness.
- ◇ For veterans who are not eligible for free medical care with the VA because of duration after active duty or another ineligibility reason, the health insurance offered under SSI/SSDI can be extremely useful. In addition, some veterans do not receive free VA health care and have some costs associated with accessing care. For these veterans, such health insurance associated with SSA benefits can be very important.
- ◇ Veterans who served during the Vietnam area remain homeless and either were deemed ineligible for VA benefits and/or are no longer receiving health care from the VA. For these veterans, SSA benefits may be essential
- ◇ For legal immigrants who have joined the service, SSA has special provisions for eligibility for veterans who were immigrants and entered service. These provisions also may provide a family benefit for dependents of veterans.