

DEPUTY COMMANDER RON FRY

TESTIMONY OF
DEPUTY COMMANDER RON FRY

TO

SENATE VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE FIELD HEARING

AUGUST 17, 2007

I would like to begin by recognizing Senator Murray for the battles she has waged over the years on behalf of this Nations Veterans. When no one in the Veterans Administration would listen to the cries for help from the Veterans Senator Murray did. She took off her tennis shoes and put on her combat boots and made good things happen for Veterans. Through her actions she saved three Veterans hospitals in Washington State, caused the establishment of necessary Community Based Out Patient Clinics and was very instrumental in causing much needed funding for Veterans health care to be increased. Senator Murray you are our hero.

I would like to thank all members of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, panel members, guests and most important the Combat Veterans to include all Veterans that are here today. The Veterans truly appreciate the opportunity the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee has given us to provide critical input on Veterans mental health issues and the problems facing our Veterans, Thank you.

The problem of mental health illness that our Veterans have encountered is now recognized as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This illness didn't just happed, it was caused. American Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines and Coast Guardsmen were introduced to the horrors of war by

our Nation. Our servicemen were then expected to kill the enemy by any means possible. They were expected to align the sights of their weapons upon another human being and make the final decision to pull the trigger and kill that human being. The act of killing or being killed begins the development of PTSD. The Veteran then is exposed to the horror of watching other Veterans being killed and/or maimed in such horrible ways that the memory lives on inside the Veteran the rest of his/her life.

The memory of those war experiences will continue to fester themselves in the mind of the veteran and will begin to affect the veterans personality, his relationship with family members, friends, employers and society as a whole. The Veteran often turns to drinking in excess and in some cases to illegal drugs. He/she will withdraw from family, friends and society. The withdrawal will be misunderstood by those persons that have not gone through the same experiences the Veteran has in combat. Society will shy away from its heroes compounding the problem the Veteran has with PTSD illness.

Veterans, when they finally learn about the Veterans Administration PTSD

2

Testimony of Deputy Commander Ron Fry cont'd
August 17, 2007

Program, turns to the VA for mental health care. The VA mental health Professionals examine the Veteran and make a diagnosis of PTSD that is

service connected and begins treatment. The VA treatment facility requires the Veteran to submit a copy of his/her military discharge commonly known as a DD-214 which shows the Veteran's war service.

The disabled Veteran armed with the diagnosis of a service connected disability by a VA Doctor and his/her DD-214 can now apply to the VA benefits side of the VA for disability compensation. The empire built by the VA over the years through its delaying tactics of approving a Veteran's disability claim significantly increases the stress well above his/her current levels. Veterans needing disability assistance now are put through an unnecessary process that often includes an initial denial of benefits followed by probably another denial or the minimum award of disability rating. The VA during its review of the Veterans disability claim will require the Veteran to be seen by a civilian doctor even though a VA doctor has already examined, diagnosed and are treating the Veteran for the disability. What a waste of VA Funding! The amount of redundant paper work and the great amount of that paper work surly is one of the major causes of the long stressful delays causing the VA Claims process to take 6 months to many years to complete. While the long drawn out claims

3

Testimony of Deputy Commander Ron Fry cont'd
August 17, 2007

process runs its course disabled Veterans who cannot work due to their disability(s) suffers extreme hardships. Many are forced into bankruptcy and/or become homeless even though the VA doctors

have diagnosed the Veterans disability(s). The VA spends huge amounts of money on the Veterans Administration Benefits side of the VA determining disability eligibility that should have already been determined by the VA doctors and the Veterans DD-214.

The Veterans Administration Benefits and its Regional offices spend more time looking for bureaucratic type reasons to deny and/or delay the valid disability claim of our Veterans. I have worked on Veterans disability claims for the last 15 years and have read the responses sent by the VA back to the Veteran justifying denial of the claim. What a laugh you would get reading those denials if it weren't for the unjustified pain and stress they put on our Veterans. The first denial appears to discourage the already ill Veteran from continuing to seek his/her valid disabilities claims from the VA. Thank goodness the Veteran Service Organizations have the foresight to develop a net work of trained Service Offices to help the Veteran fight for their disabilities benefits from the VA.

4

Testimony of Deputy Commander Ron Fry
August 17, 2007

Veterans have come to think, and justifiably so, that the VA itself is the major obstacle to the Veterans getting their rightful benefits for service connected disabilities. The current VA system forces the Veteran to go to a VA medical center or clinic which often is the first encounter the Veteran has with the VA. This first appointment with the VA begins with

a screening process that concentrates on the Veterans financial status and the category of eligibility he or she falls into.

The first step in determining a Veterans eligibility to receive health care through the VA is the completion of the VA Form 10-10EZ, Application For Health Benefits (Attachment 1). The VA collects financial information on the Veteran, the Veterans spouse and for some reason on the Veterans first child. The VA uses data on the Veterans income, property, and all assets and that of the Veterans spouse and first born. The information is then compared to the annually adjusted financial thresholds of the MEANS test to determine if the Veteran will have to pay for medical care as spelled out in the VA manual titled Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents, 2007 Edition. The MEANS test is a system applied by our government to force the Veteran to pay into the cost of his/her medical care. The Veteran has already earned his/her medical benefits through service to our Country.

5

Testimony of Deputy Commander Ron Fry cont'd
August 17, 2007

This form of stealing from Veterans who have loyally and honorably served this country and earned the right to health care is totally unacceptable. A Veteran is a Veteran and was categorized as such because of service in our Military and therefore should not be penalized because they were able to have some measure of success after their military service. The MEANS Test must be abolished! It is time our government made the people of the United States of America its number 1 priority instead of the putting so many other countries

first. We need to take care of America first.

I have listed below a few areas of concern to our Veterans which include:

1. The budget for Veterans health care must be mandatory instead of the discretionary funding system used now. This system of funding Veterans health care has been a failure. Under this system of funding only a small portion of Veterans needing health care are able to get earned treatment through the VA.
2. The VA, citing funding shortages, through its CARES initiative have either closed medical facilities or greatly reduce the availability of Veterans health care. The VA by reducing health care services at many of VA medical care facilities to 8:00 AM- 3:30 PM with no services on weekends or holidays. The Veteran is left to forge for medical care on the civilian market. The Veteran who would have his health care paid by the VA but now is at a

6

Testimony of Deputy Commander Ron Fry cont'd
August 17, 2007

great risk of having to pay for the treatment that the VA is supposed to be responsible for paying. This problem is serious. The VA in its instructions to Veterans concerning payment of medical bills on the civilian market list 90 days for the VA to settle the bill. Unfortunately, the civilian medical facility holds the Veteran responsible for the bill instead of the VA.

Consequently, when the VA makes a decision to pay the bill and it exceeds the 90 day period as it usually does, the civilian medical agency turns the account over to collections . Veterans that have had this happen to them

experienced a negative credit report and seizure of bank accounts and some have had to file for bankruptcy. The VA's response to this problem is to hold the Veterans responsible through current payment procedures for the bill. The VA has in effect forced the Veterans needing health care after hours, weekends and holidays to pay for health care that would have been available at VA Medical facilities had they not been shut down. The co-payments that a Veteran pays at the VA has now turned into full cost on the civilian market.

3. The VA headstone provided for a deceased Veteran cannot be placed upon his/her grave until the bill for the burial services has been paid in full.

I talked to one family that cannot afford to pay for those services and has been carrying their father's headstone in the trunk of their car for the past 2 years.

The Veteran who served his/her country honorably deserves better.

7

Testimony of Deputy Commander Ron Fry cont'd
August 17, 2007

4. The red tape of the VA to Veterans holds no valid place in the Veterans need for medical and mental health care. The red tape is viewed as a make work job by some bureaucrat for job security as opposed to a real justifiable need of the Veterans. One example is how long it takes the VA to process the plans and design of a new VA medical hospital or clinic. That process adds years to the time of sending the request for a medical facility or clinic to Congress to be funded. That long drawn out process must be shortened so medical care needs of the Veteran can be met. The Walla Walla Veterans Medical Center is a good example of the problems created by the VA system. The VA had initially set 2009 for the major construction proposal for the

Walla Walla Medical Center. That date has now been pushed by the VA Forward to 2012. Congress is waiting on the request for funding but the VA process continues to hinder access to medical care needed by our Veterans.

5. In a discussion I had with a VA mental health professional about the probability of all Veterans who has served in combat having some degree of PTSD. The mental health professional said that all combat veterans have PTSD from their combat experiences.
6. The Veterans PTSD illness is having a profound effect upon the families of veterans and especially the families of Veterans that have been sent to

8

Testimony of Deputy Commander Ron Fry cont'd
August 17, 2007

combat zones on multiple tours. The Veteran that returns from combat will never be the same person to the spouse and children as when he/she left for the war. The Veteran will return home where he will exhibit the the symptoms of PTSD that has led to abuse of the spouse and children, paranoia, distancing of ones self, high number of divorces, drug and/or alcohol abuse, trouble with the law, suicide and so many more. The Veteran has trouble holding a steady job, he often moves around a lot, has trouble getting along with people, and is extremely uncomfortable in a crowd. Due to the Veterans PTSD illness he/she will have a much lower income producing capability. Thus emerges homelessness of the Veteran and/or family. The Veteran has not chosen to be mentally ill

with PTSD but was sent to war by his/her count

The Veterans of the United States with out question picked up their weapons and marched of to war to protect our families and the freedoms we enjoy. The civilian peer that did not have to march off to war is able to pursue a stable and more financially secure life for his/her family. The Veteran and family will have to suffer the effects of combat for the rest of their lives.

Prepared by: Ron Fry