

OpEdNews.com

Original Article at

http://www.opednews.com/articles/opedne_larry_sc_051226_why_doesn_t_the_va_t.htm

December 26, 2005

Why Doesn't the VA tell Veterans About Their Benefits?

Millions of veterans lose out on billions in benefits because the VA doesn't tell them they qualify – Why? – Money! – And, because the VA is not required to tell anyone about any benefits – Republicans oppose legislation to require VA to inform veterans of benefits

By Larry Scott

Last week virtually every newspaper in the country carried the story about veterans, or their widows, not receiving the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) benefits to which they were entitled. Headlines read: "2 MILLION VETERANS, WIDOWS MISS OUT ON VA PENSIONS."

This story, from the Knight-Ridder Newspapers, shocked many. How could two million people not be receiving their VA benefits? (It should be noted that veterans' groups feel the two million number is very low.) For an answer we have to go back to November, and a story from the Associated Press: "PROJECT HELPS VETS GET BENEFITS."

The project in the headline is a pilot program in Clark County, Washington. State officials, working in Vancouver, used computer records to search for veterans and widows who were receiving Medicaid benefits from the state. Then they worked with those Medicaid recipients to see if they qualified for VA benefits.

So far the project has saved the state of Washington \$4 million. That figure is just for Clark County. Project officials estimate that the savings could be more than \$22 million a year if they go state-wide.

An extra bonus in the project is that once veterans or widows are connected with the VA, they learn of other benefits to which they are entitled. This could be anything from free mobility devices to monthly compensation or pension payments.

So far, the VA has been tight-lipped about the Clark County

program, issuing only generic statements indicating that they would not interfere in the state program designed to inform veterans of their benefits.

However, this pits the state of Washington against the VA in a battle to keep healthcare and benefits costs under control. And, with the state "moving" Medicaid recipients to VA programs, the already underfunded VA budget gets squeezed even harder.

Now, we go back to the first headline. Why are there millions of veterans and widows nationwide who are not getting VA benefits? The simple answer is because they don't know they are qualified. But, the real answer is much more complex.

The VA is NOT required to tell veterans, dependents or widows that they qualify for benefits. As strange as this may seem, the VA is under no obligation to inform anyone of any benefits.

This is also true for veterans who are already enrolled in the VA system. Millions of veterans in the VA system are only receiving some of their benefits. Most veterans do not know that if they have at least a 10 per cent service-connected disability they can get free eyeglasses, hearing aids and mobility devices such as canes and walkers. Other little-known benefits go begging as well. Very few veterans know that they can get a clothing allowance (now over \$600 a year) if they wear a prosthetic device that damages clothing or use topical medications for skin ailments.

I found myself in this situation a few years ago. After almost 20 years in the VA system I discovered that they would pay for my eyeglasses. No one had told me this. I discovered it by reading endless pages of veterans' benefits information on line. I estimate I spent over \$5,000 for eyeglasses that could have been provided by the VA.

Why doesn't the VA inform veterans of their benefits? The VA's answer is simply because it is not a requirement. Veterans' groups are more critical and claim it's all about money. And, there is evidence to support this view.

Up until about three years ago the VA had outreach programs designed to find and inform veterans of their benefits. These programs were cancelled by former VA Secretary Anthony J. Principi, a Republican political appointee. The reason? The programs were "too successful" and it was felt the VA budget couldn't handle any more veterans in the system. Many veterans' organizations used to hold "veterans' benefits fairs" at VA facilities. The VA no longer allows these events (Principi, again) and the organizations had to move them to private property where the likelihood of meeting veterans was much lower.

Another valid criticism of the VA's "non-information" policy is that poor veterans suffer the most. These veterans are least likely to have contacts in the veterans' community to help them. And, they are not likely to have the resources, such as Internet access, to dig out the information on their own.

There has been legislation floating around Congress for years that would require to VA to inform all veterans of all available benefits. That legislation gets bounced from committee to subcommittee to hearings with no real action. Republican legislators have fought it at every turn.

So we find ourselves in the unique situation of having the state informing veterans of federal benefits. Look for these programs to grow, not only in Washington, but in other states as well. The irony here is that as states look to save money, veterans will be the winners.

But, the real answer to the problem lies in the legislation to require the VA to inform all veterans of all their benefits. With a Republican-held House and Senate, the chances of it passing are exactly zero.

Authors Website: <http://www.vawatchdog.org>

Authors Bio: Larry Scott (larry@vawatchdog.org) served four years in the U.S. Army with overseas tours as a Broadcast Journalist in Korea and the Azores and a stateside tour as a Broadcast Journalism Instructor at the Defense Information School (DINFOS). He was awarded DOD's First Place Thomas Jefferson Award for Excellence in Journalism. After the Army, Larry was a news anchor on WNBC Radio in New York City. He receives VA compensation for a service-connected disability. Larry is a regular on the Thom Hartmann show on KPOJ radio in Portland, Oregon. Today, Larry resides in Southwest Washington and operates the website [VA Watchdog dot Org](http://www.vawatchdog.org).

[Back to Article](#)