

IOWA CITY PresCitizen

VA needs to fix health care problems

Most people go into the military thinking that the government will take care of their health care needs if they end up getting hurt or wounded. It's a reasonable expectation, of course, particularly in wartime, and one that the nation should rightly consider on Veterans Day.

In practice, however, our 25 million military veterans have no guarantee that the government will provide for their health care needs, particularly if they suffer physical or psychological ailments that require long-term care.

The Department of Veterans Affairs, the primary agency for taking care of these needs, suffers from chronic underfunding. As a result, veterans from World War II to the current conflicts involving the War on Terror endure a system of rationed health care through reduced services, lengthy delays in appointments and higher co-payments. In many cases, sick and disabled veterans

Ed Kemp Guest opinion

are not provided with any health care treatment at all.

Examples of poor planning and insufficient budgets abound.

Earlier this year, the VA revealed a \$1 billion shortfall in its fiscal 2006 operating budget. This came as no surprise to AMVETS and other veterans service organizations, which had predicted the shortfall several months earlier. Thankfully, Congress took action to correct the imbalance. Such is the precarious nature of VA funding.

Unlike federal programs that have mandatory budgets such as the Defense Department, Social Security and Medicare, veterans' health care is considered a discretionary budget item.

The budget for veterans' health care is determined each year by the administra-

tion and members of Congress in a competitive environment in which the health care costs of military service are weighed against other government priorities.

How can an agency as important as the VA operate efficiently and effectively or make reasonable plans for the future in this funding environment?

We think Congress should re-examine its priorities and make veterans' health care mandatory as soon as possible. This is critical not only to provide proper health care for our current veterans, but also to ensure that our nation is able to satisfy its military personnel needs through voluntary recruitment in the future.

About 103,000 of the 400,000 military servicemen and women returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have required health care services for the physical and psychological traumas of war. Twelve percent of them, in

fact, have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

The Department of Veterans Affairs is uniquely qualified to care for veterans' needs because of its specialized experience in treating service-connected ailments. Mandatory funding also could improve the VA's ability to provide treatment and rehabilitative services for blinded veterans and veterans with spinal cord injuries, as well as those suffering from mental illness or having special needs.

Additional reforms also are needed. Toward this end, AMVETS is organizing a national symposium in Chicago in October 2006. The symposium will bring together a diverse and representative group of veterans to discuss new and innovative ways to ensure the long-term solvency of a system of earned benefits that is both adequate and relevant to the needs of younger veterans,

including National Guard and Reserve members who currently serve our country both here and abroad. We believe that the results of this symposium will make a tremendous difference in the lives of the 2,000 servicemen and women in Iraq and Afghanistan who call Iowa home, as well as the millions of others who have served or will serve this country in the years ahead.

In sum, arguments in favor of mandatory funding for veterans' health care are not solely based on the need for more money. More specifically, they're based on the need to provide sufficient resources to ensure that the promises we have made to those who serve our nation are kept. We owe our veterans nothing less.

Ed Kemp, a native of Waterloo, Iowa, is national commander of AMVETS, which represents veterans from every branch of the military, including the National Guard and Reserves.