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Proposal to Ease Aid for G.I.'s With Stress Disorder

By [JAMES DAO](#)

Under fire from veterans groups and Congress for its handling of disability claims, the [Department of Veterans Affairs](#) is proposing new regulations that it says will make it easier for veterans to seek compensation for [post-traumatic stress disorder](#).

The proposal is intended to lower the burden on noncombat veterans who claim they developed PTSD in the service and [to speed processing of those claims](#), which represent a significant part of the 82,000 disability claims the department receives each month.

Current rules require veterans who have received diagnoses of PTSD to document that they experienced [traumatic events](#) during service that triggered the disorder. For veterans who did not serve in combat units, such proof can be difficult to find given the unevenness of military record keeping.

But veterans' advocates have argued that many noncombat troops, including truck drivers and supply clerks, have experienced such events, which include roadside bombs, firefights, mortar attacks or the deaths of friends. Despite receiving diagnoses of PTSD, many of those troops struggle to receive disability compensation.

The proposed rule would eliminate the requirement to document triggering events, provided veterans with PTSD could show that they were in places and performed duties where such events might have occurred. Their symptoms must also be consistent with the trauma they claim to have experienced.

[By some estimates, 20 percent of troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have PTSD.](#)

In a [news release](#) on Monday, the secretary of veterans affairs, [Eric K. Shinseki](#), said, "The hidden wounds of war are being addressed vigorously and comprehensively by this administration as we move V.A. forward in its transformation to the 21st century."

Dennis M. Cullinan, national legislative director for Veterans of Foreign Wars, called the proposed change "a big plus" for veterans. Mr. Cullinan cited the example of a truck driver in Iraq who might have experienced repeated roadside bomb attacks but whose military record would not have shown combat duty.

Mr. Cullinan also said that changing the policy administratively was faster than waiting for legislation. A [bill in Congress](#) that would make similar changes, sponsored by Representative John Hall, Democrat of New York, faces opposition because of the projected cost, nearly \$5 billion.

But some veterans' advocates responded skeptically to the proposed regulation, which now must undergo a 60-day review period.

“Whenever the V.A. touts a proposed compensation rule change that it says will ‘make it easier for a veteran to claim service connection,’ red flags go up all over the place,” a veterans’ advocate, Larry Scott, wrote on his Web site, vawatchdog.org.

Critics said the proposed rule would still require veterans to prove a connection between a traumatizing event and their PTSD, even when that connection was not clear cut. Strict application of that requirement could lead to many rejected claims, they say.

Katrina J. Eagle, a veterans’ lawyer in California, said the proposed rule would also require veterans to receive diagnoses from department-employed or approved [psychiatrists](#) and [psychologists](#). Currently, veterans can receive diagnoses from their own psychiatrists.

“This is their way of being able to control the diagnosis,” Ms. Eagle said. “I don’t see how this is going to make it easier.”

But other veterans’ advocates said the proposed requirement on using department psychiatrists seemed like a reasonable means to reduce fraud and standardize diagnoses.

Meaghan Smith, a spokeswoman for Mr. Hall, said that he thought the proposed rule change was “pretty significant” but that he would study it closer to make sure it was “as inclusive” as his bill.

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