

Iraq veteran healthcare could top \$650b

Doctors group warns possible crisis looming

By Bryan Bender, Globe Staff | November 9, 2007

WASHINGTON - A group of noted physicians predicted yesterday that healthcare for Iraq veterans could top \$650 billion, another warning of a looming social crisis as thousands of veterans struggle with mental and physical disabilities and other disruptions to family life.

The study by Physicians for Social Responsibility, titled "Shock and Awe Hits Home," marked the first attempt to isolate the financial costs of "the wide-ranging traumatic mental and social effects of the Iraq war."

The liberal group, which shared the 1985 Nobel Peace Prize, estimated that the long-term financial burden to care for a new generation of veterans will far outstrip the amount of money spent on combat operations in Iraq.

"Providing medical care and disability benefits to veterans will cost far more than is generally being acknowledged," according to the study, overseen by Dr. Evan Kanter, a psychiatrist and neuroscientist at the University of Washington and a staff physician for the Department of Veterans Affairs.

"As physicians and healthcare professionals, we are acutely aware of the actual price we are paying in human terms, and we are compelled to bring this to the attention of the Congress and the American people," the report added.

The estimate was derived by analyzing the current costs of treating debilitating health problems of troops in Iraq, including blast injuries to arms and legs from improvised explosive devices; the historically high instances of traumatic brain injuries; and post-traumatic stress disorder, which the VA believes affects at least one-third of soldiers serving there.

Since the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, at least 60,000 US service members have been wounded or become mentally ill from their battlefield experiences.

Due to advances in body armor and battlefield medicine, the ratio of wounded to killed is 8 to 1, compared with 3 to 1 during the Vietnam War and 2 to 1 for World War II. The percentage of amputees is the highest since the Civil War.

The analysis assumed that, at the current pace, as many as 2 million men and women will be deployed to Iraq through the end of the conflict.

It also relied on available figures for veterans' disability payments.

For example, a veteran without a spouse or dependents who is 100 percent disabled receives about \$2,400 per month from the government. Over 50 years, that could total more than \$1.4 million.

The report said that healthcare costs could go even higher.

It did not account for thousands of civilian contractors serving in Iraq, including more than 1,000 who have filed disability claims with the Department of Labor seeking government compensation.

The report came amid other new signs of the growing toll of the war on soldiers and their families.

New Defense Department data released yesterday show that thousands of members of the National Guard and Reserve who have returned from deployment have lost their jobs, health insurance, pensions, and other benefits despite federal laws protecting them from being penalized for leaving civilian employment for wartime service.

The data, previously withheld by the Pentagon, was made public at a hearing chaired by Senator Edward M. Kennedy, Democrat of Massachusetts.

It shows that nearly 11,000 soldiers have been denied prompt reemployment after leaving civilian jobs for military deployments; more than 22,000 lost seniority and pay; nearly 20,000 had their pensions cut; and nearly 11,000 were denied their previous health insurance benefits.

Since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, 630,000 members of the National Guard and Reserve have been mobilized.

"When these heroes return home, we owe them more than kind words or prayers," said Kennedy, chairman of the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee. "We must do whatever we can to help them make the transition back to civilian life."

Federal law - including the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Act - is supposed to protect veterans from workplace discrimination and allow them to seek redress for lost jobs or other benefits.

But Brenda S. Farrell, director of defense capabilities and management at the Government Accountability Office, told Kennedy's panel yesterday that "no single agency is responsible for maintaining visibility over the entire complaint resolution process."

Indeed, the departments of Labor, Defense, and Justice and the US Office of Special Counsel have responsibility for veterans' employment rights.

Many who are eligible are not aware of the government assistance. Twenty-three percent of returning soldiers experiencing employment problems sought help in 2006, according to the results of a government survey released at the hearing.

Kennedy said yesterday that he plans to introduce legislation to help repair the deficiencies in a government safety net that by many indications is failing veterans. That failure is also signified by new figures that indicate 1 in 4 homeless Americans are veterans, including at least 1,500 who served in Iraq or Afghanistan.

The Alliance to End Homelessness, a nonprofit organization, found that 194,254 out of 744,313 homeless people on any given night are veterans. The findings, released yesterday, were based on information from the Department of Veterans Affairs and the US Census Bureau.

"This is all connected," Senator Jack Reed, a Rhode Island Democrat, said at yesterday's hearing.

The criticism of current veterans' programs crosses partisan lines.

"Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are still waiting," Vets for Freedom, a prowar group, said in a statement yesterday. "They are waiting for new healthcare facilities. They are waiting on better post-traumatic stress disorder treatment. They are waiting on research for prosthetic limbs."