The War At Home

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Recommended Citation
Altobelli, Joseph A. Mr., "The War At Home" (2015). CUNY Academic Works.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gj_etds/120

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The War At Home
By Joseph Altobelli

Intro

Each year tens of thousands of young American men and women from New York City and around the country join the military. Some join to serve their nation. Some join to help pay for a college education. Some join simply to escape a future of little promise. Their recruitment officers inevitably assure them of the lifetime of benefits they will receive through the United States Department of Veterans Affairs. Better known as the VA.

Health care is among the most important benefits the VA offers. A soldier can be disabled before she even finishes basic training. Thousands each year sustain lifelong injuries while serving overseas. The psychological trauma that can result from combat is no longer diagnosed as simply “shellshock” and treatment is now available. Women and aging vets each have unique health care needs.

No matter their age, gender, branch of service or injury, many vets with medical problems share the same fight: Getting the benefits they were promised when they enlisted.

Veterans’ benefits date as far back as the revolution. Soldiers who served in the Continental Army were promised a pension and medical care designed specifically for soldiers. After the Civil War, veterans’ homes were established and hospital care was provided for all returning vets. By the end of World War I, a host of benefits were provided to disabled vets through several government agencies. In 1930 a consolidated Office of Veterans Administration was established and in 1944, toward the end of World War II, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the G.I. Bill into law. It provided vets a variety of benefits including lower mortgage payments, unemployment compensation, low-interest loans and even cash payments, which could be used as tuition to attend college.

Things began to change for vets and the VA with the War in Vietnam. Vietnam vets were not given the hero’s welcome when they returned that previous generations had received. Because Vietnam was formally a police action with no declaration of war, vets did not get the same benefits as soldiers of previous wars. The vets themselves distrusted government services, and veterans’ needs fell from public attention. By the time the War in Iraq began the VA system was overburdened, underfunded and of little interest outside of the military community.
In 2014 a series of scandals were exposed, shaking the VA to its core. At the VA hospital in Phoenix, Arizona, at least 40 veterans were left to die in the halls while waiting for care. The tragedy shed a light on the VA's inability to handle a growing veteran population with ever-more complex needs. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki resigned from office due to the fallout from the scandal, calling the problem “systemic.”

With $1.5 billion in budget cuts planned for 2016, things are not looking up. New York City vets are already feeling cutbacks. In the summer of 2015, the 12 West outpatient ward at the Brooklyn VA hospital closed. 25 beds were removed. It has forced local vets in Brooklyn as well as Staten Island and Queens to go as far as Manhattan for services. This can be a long and arduous trip for people with medical ailments. Many veterans can barely walk, don't own cars or need immediate medical attention.

Thanks to one New York City Council member, local vets may get a break. In July of 2016, a new bill penned by Council Member Eric Ulrich aims to make the lives of New York vets just a little bit easier. The bill will do away with the Mayor's Office of Veteran's Affairs and start a new, larger entity -- the Department of Veteran’s Services. The DVS will expand the current five-person staff to 35 employees spread throughout all five boroughs. A DVS office will be set up in each Borough Hall to assist vets in finding jobs, finding homes, and finding quick medical aide. DVS will have an increased budget of nearly $4 million provided mostly from city taxes, up from just the $600,000 budget for the Mayor’s office of Veteran’s Affairs.

What do local vets think about area VA services? Why did Ulrich sponsor such an ambitious bill? What does Martina Parauda, Director of the Veterans Affairs New York Harbor Health System, think?

Profiles

Name: Ciné Alston
Home: Brooklyn
Position: Army Reserve

Bio: Ciné Alston followed in the footsteps of her veteran mother and decided to join the Army after graduating from Clark Atlanta University with a major in mass media arts. Ciné is currently in the Army Reserve and pursuing a master’s degree in public administration from Long Island University in Brooklyn. Ciné has not seen combat due to the GI Bill helping her get through school. In the Army Reserve, Ciné supplies logistics and does intake of all Military equipment and ammunition. She has watched her mother struggle to receive benefits from the VA Hospital since 2000. Ciné’s mother was diagnosed with high blood pressure and PTSD. Thanks to the help of a friend of a friend who worked at the VA, Ciné’s mother Stephanie finally received expedited help after a decade of
cat and mouse with the hospital. This has left Ciné with a fear that she will also struggle to receive veteran’s benefits from the hospital in the future.

Name: Michael Lynch  
Home: Manhattan  
Conflict: Iraq War

Bio: Mike Lynch served nearly 9 years in the United States Army. Mike was a part of the ROTC in high school, and made the transition to the armed forces right after graduation. He was a motor transport operator and underwent covert operations while in Iraq. He then moved on to military security in Afghanistan until returning home. Shortly after his homecoming, Mike started experiencing symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. In addition to PTSD, Mike was diagnosed with panic attacks and manic depression from the VA. In addition to seeking emotional help from the VA, Mike seeks aid for a back injury sustained in combat. Mike also depends on monetary benefits from the VA in order to attend film school and reside in Manhattan.

Name: Allen Bortnick  
Home: Brooklyn  
Conflict: Korean War

Bio: Al Bortnick was drafted in 1951 to fight in the Korean War. Due to a foot injury sustained by a rogue military vehicle at Camp Breckenridge, Allen spent seven weeks in the hospital. While overseas, serving in Munich, Allen worked with the Public Information Office where he collected information about fellow soldiers. Upon resuming civilian life, Allen dabbled in many successful small businesses. He is even the brain behind blister packaging that many products are still packaged in today. Currently, Allen is retired, but is still living for the fight. This time though, his enemy is the director of VA NY Harbor Healthcare, Martina Parauda. Allen went to seek treatment at the Brooklyn VA for the same foot injury sustained years prior. Allen’s fifth metatarsal in his right foot was dissolving. During the summer of 2015, the 12 West ward of the Brooklyn VA Hospital was closed, much to the dismay of many New York veterans, the most outspoken being Allen.

Name: Martina Parauda  
Location: Manhattan  
Position: Director of VA Harbor Healthcare

Bio: Martina Parauda has been the director of Veteran’s Affairs Harbor Healthcare for nearly six years. Harbor Healthcare covers Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island. The Bronx has their own VA hospital with its own director. She has come under fire in the last year for closing the 12 West ward of the Brooklyn VA to allocate money into newer growing programs, such as advances in sleep study testing for veterans. Martina has done her best to meet with and quell the fears of all
the veterans that use her hospitals, to only some avail. She has held numerous town hall style meetings all over the city, with the hopes of explaining that there will always be constant care for patients in New York is they need it.

Name: Eric Ulrich  
Location: Queens  
Position: New York City Councilman/Chair of the Committee on Veterans

Bio: Eric Ulrich is a New York City Councilman from Ozone Park, Queens, and is also the sitting chair for the Committee on Veterans. Although not a veteran himself, his family is deeply entrenched in the military. His brother is still an active Marine, his grandfather served in the Navy following Vietnam, and his great-grandfather transported Nazi prisoners during World War II. Eric Ulrich uses his political power to help is community and all local veterans in New York. He saw the problems coming out about the VA nationally and decided to change things up. Eric has passed a bill, which will take effect July 1st, 2016, that will set up the New York City Department of Veterans Affairs, and place an office in all five boroughs, so vets don’t have to travel to the Mayor’s office in Manhattan to seek help.

Name: Kevin Gloster  
Home: Queens  
Conflict: Vietnam

Bio: Jamaica, Queens native Kevin Gloster was drafted for the Vietnam War in 1967. He agrees with the assertions made by Director Parauda and Councilman Ulrich regarding the drop in VA enrollment following the Vietnam War. According to Gloster, the VA hospital was a free-for-all without much security and structure, with servicemen and women charging the facilities for aid. It is common knowledge that Vietnam veterans were not given a hero’s welcome their fathers and grandfathers were given before them, so distrust of government facilities were at an all time high. Gloster started seeking aid from the Brooklyn VA nearly a decade ago, when he was diagnosed with diabetes. Since then, he has had several toes amputated and requires the use of a wheelchair. He also goes to the VA to attend a PTSD support group and to acquire medication.

Factoids

Did you know that New York has 63,899 female veterans? That means 2 out of every 25 veterans is a woman. (Source: Department of VA)

Did you know that 46% of Iraq/Afghanistan war veterans have a need for mental health care, compared to 41% of veterans of all other conflicts combined? (Source: Department of VA)
In 2014, over $60 billion dollars was given to veterans for either compensation or pensions. $6 billion of that was just for New York veterans. (Source: Department of VA)

New York Harbor VA of Brooklyn and Manhattan provides health care to nearly 9,000 veterans. (Source: Department of VA)

Did you know that New York State alone has nearly 900,000 veterans? (Source: Department of VA)

As of April 2015, over 4 Million veterans depend on the VA for benefits in the United States. (Source: Department of VA)

Outro

Vets and the VA are a hot topic in the 2016 election, and presidential candidates are batting veterans’ issues back and forth in their campaign speeches. Vets are an important interest group, and the candidates are actively courting the vote.

Donald Trump, the Republican nominee, is the most outspoken presidential candidate on the issue. He has significant support within the veteran community and is seen as the candidate for vets. Earlier this year Trump chose not to attend a Fox News debate following a dispute with one of its reporters. Instead he hosted a televised fundraising event for vets. The $6 million he claimed to raise has been disputed.

Trumps Website provides an outline of his plan for vets if elected:

‘The Trump plan will decrease wait times, improve healthcare outcomes, and facilitate a seamless transition from service into civilian life.’ Mr. Trump plans to do this by increasing funding to mental health needs for veterans, increasing funding for job training and job placement services for returning vets, and add more doctors trained specifically for female needs. He also plans to light a fire under the VA higher-ups by making it so that veterans can show their ID at any doctor’s office and receive immediate care, allowing for competition to make the VA strengthen their own facilities in order to stay in the running with private doctors.

On the other side of the aisle, Democratic presidential front-runner Hillary Clinton vows to block any legislation that would privatize the VA. According to her website, she plans to reform the current way Veteran’s Affairs hospitals are run by overhauling the current VA governance and creating a ‘President’s Council on Veterans’ to ensure that all parties are in sync on veterans issues. She also wants to make access to VA facilities much easier and expand on programs to help with mental health issues as well as female and LGBT issues.
Right on Secretary Clinton’s tail is Senator Bernie Sanders, who also wants to expand the VA. On his website he states that he wants to fully fund and expand the VA even further, making it more accessible to veterans. “Instead of cutting benefits for the men and women who have served our country,” the Senator wrote on his website, “we should ask the most profitable corporations and the wealthiest among us to pay their fair share.” He would like to expand mental health research in addition to make dental care available to all veterans. Senator Sanders would also like to improve the processing of veteran’s claims for benefits and compensation, a problem many veterans deal with every day.

Many vets say that Trump is the one candidate that they most favor despite that each of the three remaining presidential candidates have outlined plans for how they would improve -- or even overhaul -- the Department of Veteran's Affairs. Still, many veterans say they feel like second-class citizens, always chasing help and benefits rather than being immediately serviced.

Locally vets are cautious but hopeful about the Ulrich bill. The new DVS will open its many doors on July 1, 2016. Whether it will be affective or not remains to be seen. Will it be just another government bureaucracy used as a Band-Aid or will it lead to real improvement in the lives of local vets?

“It sounds great,” said Kevin Gloster, the Vietnam vet from Queens. “The VA makes it hard because you have to come here, see this guy, and see that guy, but if they’ve got something local, maybe you can get something done. If it works I’ll be happy.”

For more information on how you could help veterans, visit:
- WWW.WoundedWarriorProject.ORG
- WWW.LeaveNoVeteranBehind.ORG
- WWW.USO.ORG
- WWW.FisherHouse.ORG