

# U.S. vets' disability filings reach historic rate

By Marilyn Marchione, The Associated Press

America's newest veterans are filing for disability benefits at a historic rate, claiming to be the most medically and mentally troubled generation of former troops the nation has ever seen.



By Charles Dharapak, AP

Marine Cpl. Larry Bailey II, of Zion, Ill., is a triple amputee and expects to get a hand transplant this summer. He is still transitioning from active duty and is not yet a veteran.

A staggering 45% of the 1.6 million veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are now seeking compensation for injuries they say are service-related. That is more than double the estimate of 21% who filed such claims after the [Gulf War](#) in the early 1990s, top government officials told the Associated Press.

What's more, these new veterans are claiming eight to nine ailments on average, and the most recent ones over the last year are claiming 11 to 14. By comparison, Vietnam veterans are currently receiving compensation for fewer than four, on average, and those from [World War II](#) and Korea just two.

It's unclear how much worse off these new veterans are than their predecessors. Many factors are driving the dramatic increase in claims — the weak economy, more troops surviving wounds, and more awareness of problems such as concussions and post-traumatic stress disorder ([PTSD](#)). Almost one-third have been granted disability so far. Government officials and some veterans' advocates say that veterans who might have been able to work with certain disabilities may be more inclined to seek benefits now because they lost jobs or can't find any. Aggressive outreach and advocacy efforts also have brought more veterans into the system, which must evaluate each claim to see if it is war-related. Payments range from \$127 a month for a 10% disability to \$2,769 for a full one.

As the U.S. commemorates the more than 6,400 troops who died in post-Sept. 11, 2001 wars, the problems of those who survived also draw attention. These new veterans are seeking a level of help the government did not anticipate, and for which there is no special fund set aside to pay.

The [Department of Veterans Affairs](#) is mired in backlogged claims, but "our mission is to take care of whatever the population is," says Allison Hickey, the VA's undersecretary for benefits. "We want them to have what their entitlement is."

The 21% who filed claims in previous wars is Hickey's estimate of an average for the 1990-91 [Operation Desert Storm](#) and Desert Shield to oust Iraqi troops from Kuwait. The VA has details only on the current disability claims being paid to veterans of each war. The AP spent three months reviewing records and talking with doctors, government officials and former troops to take stock of the new veterans. They are different in many ways from those who fought before them.

More are from the Reserves and [National Guard](#)— 28% of those filing disability claims — rather than career military. Reserves and National Guard made up a greater percentage of troops in these wars than they did in previous ones. About 31% of Guard/Reserve new veterans have filed claims, compared with 56% of career military ones.

More of the new veterans are women, accounting for 12% of those who have sought care through the VA. Women also served in greater numbers in these wars than in the past. Some female veterans are claiming PTSD because of military sexual trauma — a new challenge from a disability rating standpoint, Hickey says.

The new veterans have different types of injuries than previous veterans did. That's partly because improvised bombs have been the main weapon and because body armor and improved battlefield care allowed many of them to survive wounds that in past wars proved fatal.

"They're being kept alive at unprecedented rates," says David Cifu, the VA's medical rehabilitation chief. More than 95% of troops wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan have survived.

Larry Bailey II of Zion, Ill., north of Chicago, is an example. The 26-year-old Marine remembers flying into the air, then fellow troops attending to him, after he tripped a rooftop bomb in Afghanistan last June. He ended up a triple amputee.

"I pretty much knew that my legs were gone. My left hand, from what I remember I still had three fingers on it," although they didn't seem right, Bailey said.

He is still transitioning from active duty and is not yet a veteran.

### **A look at the numbers**

Of those who have sought VA care:

- More than 1,600 of them lost a limb; many others lost fingers or toes.
- At least 156 are blind, and thousands of others have impaired vision.

- More than 177,000 have hearing loss, and more than 350,000 report tinnitus — noise or ringing in the ears.
- Thousands are disfigured, as many as 200 of them so badly that they may need face transplants. One-quarter of battlefield injuries requiring evacuation included wounds to the face or jaw, one study found.

"The numbers are pretty staggering," says Bohdan Pomahac, a surgeon at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston who has done four face transplants on non-military patients and expects to start doing them soon on veterans.

Others have invisible wounds. More than 400,000 of these new veterans have been treated by the VA for a mental health problem, most commonly PTSD.

Tens of thousands of veterans suffered traumatic brain injury, or TBI — mostly mild concussions from bomb blasts — and doctors don't know what's in store for them long-term. Cifu, of the VA, says that roughly 20% of active-duty troops suffered concussions, but only one-third of them have symptoms lasting beyond a few months.

That's still a big number, and "it's very rare that someone has just a single concussion," says David Hovda, director of the UCLA Brain Injury Research Center. Suffering multiple concussions, or one soon after another, raises the risk of long-term problems. A brain injury also makes the brain more susceptible to PTSD, he says.

#### **Body armor takes a toll, too**

On a more mundane level, many new veterans have back, shoulder and knee problems, aggravated by carrying heavy packs and wearing the body armor that helped keep them alive. One recent study found that 19% required orthopedic surgery consultations and 4% needed surgery after returning from combat.

All of this adds up to more disability claims, which for years have been coming in faster than the government can handle them. The average wait to get a new one processed grows longer each month and is now about eight months — time that a frustrated, injured veteran might spend with no income.

More than 560,000 veterans from all wars currently have claims that are backlogged — older than 125 days. The VA's benefits chief, Hickey, says the backlog is the result of sheer volume, the high number of ailments per claim, and a new mandate to do oldest cases first.

With any war, the cost of caring for veterans rises for several decades and peaks 30 to 40 years later, when diseases of aging are more common, says Harvard economist [Linda Bilmes](#). She estimates the health care and disability costs of the recent wars at \$600 billion to \$900 billion.

"This is a huge number, and there's no money set aside," she says. "Unless we take steps now into some kind of fund that will grow over time, it's very plausible many people will feel we can't afford these benefits we overpromised."