



# Federal Health Matters

## House VA Committee Discusses Reintegration of Returning Troops

Rep. Bob Filner (D-CA), chair of the House VA Committee, led a roundtable discussion on March 17 to identify specific reintegration issues faced by veterans and service members returning home from war. The roundtable participants included the VA's chief officer for legislation regulations and intergovernmental affairs; the DoD's deputy assistant secretary of defense for reserve affairs; a retired army major general; and representatives from various advocacy, support, and professional organizations (such as the Center for Suicide Prevention at Lincoln University, the National Military Family Association, the American Psychological Association, and the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America).

Of the more than two million troops deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), over 37,000 have been wounded. And the VA reports that half of the OIF/OEF troops who have sought assistance from the VHA have done so for mental health treatment, particularly for symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder. "When these service members come home and take off the uniform, they have the expectation that life will just pick up where they left off before being deployed," said Filner. In reality, however, they often feel isolated and struggle to reconnect, which can place undue stress on their families and communities, as well as themselves.

According to Filner, the House VA Committee hopes to add to other recent legislative actions taken to

support returning service members, including the establishment of a suicide prevention hotline for veterans and the extension of VA health care to troops and veterans for at least five years postdeployment. Ideas to improve reintegration include conducting immediate physical and psychological screenings and a "de-boot" camp for all troops returning from deployment and ensuring more effective transfer of electronic medical records between the DoD and the VA.

Following the event, Filner expressed satisfaction with the roundtable and said he hopes "these discussions will lead to progress and better support for veterans and their families."

## Infectious Diseases Linked to Military Service in Iraq and Afghanistan

On March 18, VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki announced a proposed rule that extends presumptive service-connection to nine infectious diseases associated with military service in Southwest Asia and Afghanistan. Under the proposed rule, veterans who have a current diagnosis of brucellosis, *Campylobacter jejuni* infection, *Coxiella burnetii* infection (Q-fever), malaria, *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* infection, nontyphoid *Salmonella* infection, *Shigella* infection, visceral leishmaniasis, or West Nile virus only have to show evidence of service in Southwest Asia during the Persian Gulf War or Afghanistan on or after September 19, 2001. Since the Persian Gulf War has not been declared officially ended, those veterans serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom also are eligible for the new presumptions.

This decision was based on recommendations by the VA Gulf War Veterans Illnesses Task Force. Historically, Gulf War veterans have experienced difficulties when applying for disability compensation. These veterans may have been exposed to a variety of substances that could have negative health effects, including pesticides, depleted uranium, nerve agents, chemical and biological warfare agents, and certain vaccinations. Many have returned home with unexplained clusters of symptoms, such as chronic fatigue, muscle pain, abnormal weight loss, and sleep disturbances.

In response, the VA in 1992 established the Gulf War Registry Health Examination program. This comprehensive evaluation is offered free of charge to veterans who served in the Gulf region during Operations Desert Shield, Desert Storm, or Iraqi Freedom—even if they are not enrolled in the VHA. While the examination is not required, the free service can help veterans and service members prove a current diagnosis of specific illnesses.

"We recognize the frustrations that many Gulf War and Afghanistan veterans and their families experience on a daily basis as they look for answers to health questions, and seek benefits from [the] VA," Shinseki told the press. "By setting up a scientifically-based presumptive service connection, we give these deserving veterans a simple way to get the benefits they have earned in service to our country."

The proposed rule has been published in the *Federal Register*. Comments on it will be accepted for 60 days, after which a final regulation—that takes these comments into consideration—will be published. ●