FRIENDLY FIRE

Post-9/11 veterans fight on new fronts at home

BY JACQUEE PETCHEL // ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY / NEWS21

Since Sept. 11, 2001, more than 2.6 million veterans have returned from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to a country largely unprepared to meet their needs and a government that has failed on multiple levels to fulfill the obligations demanded by Congress and promised by both Republican and Democratic administrations. This summarizes the overarching findings detailed in a national News21 investigation, a project reported and executed by 26 student journalists from 12 universities across the country.

“Back Home: The Enduring Battles Facing Post-9/11 Veterans” (backhome.news21.com) documented an array of problems, including bonuses paid to disability claims processors as veterans waited months for money, a veterans’ suicide rate of two (in some cases, three) times the civilian rate, millions of dollars spent on questionable programs, some veterans charities preying on Americans’ military sentiments and a plague of female veterans, some sexually assaulted, feeling disenfranchised by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

News21 students traveled the country talking to veterans who had survived Taliban and al-Qaida attacks, roadside bombs, mortar fire and the deaths of fellow soldiers, yet when interviewed, said they had returned home to a future threatened by poverty, unemployment, homelessness and suicide. “The hardest thing you can ever do isn’t joining the military,” said 30-year-old Luis Duran, a New Yorker who had entered the Marine Corps after 9/11, deployed to Iraq and survived a suicide bomb. “The most difficult part is getting out.”

The idea for the project came from Leonard Downie Jr., former executive editor of The Washington Post and Weil Family Professor of Journalism at Arizona State University’s Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication. He chose the treatment of post-9/11 veterans because in his words, “it was so timely, and we knew that no other news organization could match the number of journalists we could assign to investigate it in such depth and tell the resulting stories in so many forms.” (Downie is also a member of IRE’s board of directors).

In the months before the students arrived at the ASU newsroom, Downie taught them a semester-long, video-conferenced seminar, inviting on-the-record guest speakers to class and assigning investigative research topics to the students.

“We wanted our students to hold accountable the government agencies and private groups that were failing to provide the returning veterans what they need and deserve to restart their lives back home after serving their country so selflessly,” Downie explained.

Following the seminar, the students worked at the Cronkite School for 10 weeks over the summer, which I directed, as executive editor. By the end of those weeks, the News21 fellows had traveled to more than 60 cities and 20 states, conducted hundreds of interviews and reviewed tens of thousands of public records and government reports. One mandate of the project was to create a multimedia experience that would engage readers. All told, the students produced some 26 stories, 12 videos, 13 interactive graphics, 26 photo galleries and a
23-minute documentary. The website also was designed by students, (principally by University of Maryland graduate Greg Kohn).

**BONUSES DESPITE BACKLOG**

Data analysis also was a central component of several stories. For example, the News21 investigation found that as the lengthy backlog of delayed and mishandled claims had begun to surge dramatically in 2011, more than two-thirds of the country’s VA claims processors had collected $5.5 million in bonuses. Claims workers had been effectively encouraged, based on a performance “credit system,” to process less-complex claims first, leaving to languish those claims involving multiple war injuries and missing paperwork.

Complex claims, the workers told us, required calling and sending follow-up letters to veterans and requesting federal documents and medical records, all of which received zero points based on the Veterans Benefits Administration’s performance evaluation for processors at the time.

For the bonus data, the team had scraped publicly available federal salary data for baseline analysis until FOIA requests to the Office of Personnel Management were fulfilled. The data was then analyzed for a number of trends, including bonuses doled out to claims examiners. The backlog data was pulled from the Veterans Benefits Administration annual reports and publicly available weekly reports.

The team (ASU’s Mary Shinn, University of Missouri’s Steven Rich and Kent State University’s Daniel Moore) then compared the data by year to the backlog of disability claims. They spent weeks calling every local union associated with VA claims processors to find those willing to talk. We found one current worker who agreed to speak on the record only because she was close to retirement. We found more than a dozen others who agreed to speak on background or off-the-record.

**SURGE IN SUICIDES**

One of the project’s most ambitious public records efforts was to gather, organize and analyze all reported veterans’ suicides, using mortality records from every state in the nation. This involved eight months of wrangling with state health departments, many of which had never fully tallied veterans’ deaths. Four reporters (Bonnie Campo and Chase Cook of the University of Oklahoma, Forrest Burnson of the University of Texas and Jeff Hargarten of the University of Minnesota) started making requests in January. The veteran suicides were tabulated and analyzed using military status on death certificates, some from electronic records while others had to be counted by hand.

Records from the states showed the annual suicide rate among veterans is about 30 for every 100,000 of the population, compared to a civilian rate of about 14 per 100,000. The suicide rate among veterans had increased an average 2.6 percent a year from 2005 to 2011, or more than double that of the 1.1 percent civilian
rate, according to News21’s analysis of states’ mortality data. In Arizona, the suicide rate was 43.9 per 100,000 people, more than three times the civilian suicide rate.

MANY MORE BATTLES

Though post-9/11 veterans use the VA more than other veterans, no government agency had fully calculated the lifetime cost of health care for the large number of men and women with life-lasting wounds, according to a review of thousands of pages of Congressional Budget Office reports and other government documents. But it was certain to steadily escalate because of the veterans’ higher survival rates, longer tours of duty and extensive injuries, plus the anticipated cost of reducing wait times for medical appointments and reaching veterans in rural areas. This story (by Jessica Wilde of the University of Maryland) was told in both words and through powerful on-camera accounts from veterans with multiple amputations.

Even so, our investigation showed, the VA and the Department of Defense had spent at least $1.3 billion over the last four years trying unsuccessfully to develop a single electronic-health-records system between the two departments. This failed effort, as documented by years of federal budget reports and other records, had left veterans’ health records, which are critical to their disability claims, literally piled up in paper files across the country (by the University of Florida’s Hannah Winston).

All of these issues had resulted in other collateral consequences, such as homelessness (as documented by Catey Traylor of Central Michigan University and ASU’s Peter Hayden), not to mention post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injuries (by ASU’s Trahern Wallace Jones) and a dramatic rise in hearing loss (by ASU’s Kay Temple). A News21 documentary (by ASU’s Jake Stein and Oklahoma’s Bonnie Campa) examined the millions of dollars spent by the VA to research complementary and alternative treatments for veterans seeking help beyond prescription medications for PTSD and other conditions.

The wars also had significantly affected women, who, according to a News21 demographic analysis (by ASU’s Mauro Whiteman), made up 17.4 percent of post-9/11 Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans. More than a quarter of those women were black, almost twice the proportion found in the entire U.S. population.

Female veterans were less likely to find a job than male veterans and more likely to be a single parent with children to support, interviews and records showed. The challenges confronting female vets had been recounted through the voices of four women in Kent, Ohio (by ASU’s Caitlin Cruz, Asha Anchan of the University of Nebraska and Kelsey Hightower of the University of Oklahoma).

OBSTACLES TO FINDING WORK, RECEIVING CHARITY

Among our other findings:

The Post-9/11 GI Bill had paid for nearly 1 million veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars to go to school at a cost of about $30 billion since 2009, but the federal government had yet to document how many of those students had graduated, much less whether they stayed in school (Meg Wagner and Hannah Winston of the University of Florida and Anthony Cave of Florida International University).

Despite laws protecting the civilian jobs of National Guard members and reservists, more than 15,000 troops since 2001 had had to fight for their employment rights through official complaints that had required tedious and sometimes expensive disputes (ASU’s Rachel Leingang and Nebraska’s Riley Johnson). In addition, even with highly visible efforts by Congress, legislatures, businesses and philanthropists to push jobs initiatives, about 166,000 veterans or nearly 8 percent, had not found work since returning to the civilian work force. A state-by-state survey by News21 also showed that though the Obama administration had prodded states to recognize military experience as sufficient for state licensing – certifying truck drivers, nurses and paramedics, among others – most had so far delayed, forcing veterans to duplicate the training they had received in their military jobs (Johnson and University of Oregon’s Collon Tolland).

In the years that the country had been at war, Americans had given more than $12 billion to veterans’ and military charities. Donations had grown nationwide from more than $615 million in 2001 to more than $1.6 billion in 2011 alone. Federal and state laws demand financial reporting from all charities, but they require little in the way of reporting the results of services the charities claim to provide.

Our investigation found that though many charities had offered needed help, others had spent much of their money – sometimes most of it – on the organization’s overhead expenses, rather than services promised to veterans. One, Disabled Veterans Services of Pompano Beach, Fla., had reported raising more than $8 million in cash and nearly $4 million in donated goods that it had claimed would help disabled and homeless veterans. But barely a nickel of each dollar the charity raised in cash had gone directly to help veterans. News21 created a database (by ASU students Chad Garland and Andrew Knockel) of nearly 2,000 organizations based on records from the National Center for Charitable Statistics, or NCCS, and federal tax filings, or 990s, for 2001 through 2011. The number of such charities had more than tripled from just 583 in 2001 to more than 1,900, according to their analysis. More than half of the public’s donations – about $6 billion – had gone to just 12 of those charities.

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