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Survey will eye needs of veterans

Panel seeking to match them with aid programs

BY J. MILES LAYTON The Dominion Post

INFO , or to obtain a copy of the survey: West Virginia Division of Veterans Affairs, 558-3661.

A joint Senate-House committee is using a statewide survey to get a handle on the needs of West Virginia's estimated 5,500 Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans.

The survey is part of an effort by the Select Committee on Veterans Issues to match veterans with assistance and benefit programs.

"What we hope to accomplish with this study is to be sure that we, as a state, do as much as we can for our returning service men and women," said Delegate Barbara Evans Fleischauer, D-Monongalia, House co-chair of the committee. "This survey will help us to get a better picture of how they are doing. The results will be used to help us to pass laws or put additional money where it is needed."

The group hopes to gather information about the injuries suffered by veterans and the medical and emotional support they require, and about other factors that could help or hinder their transition to civilian life, said Sen. Jon Blair Hunter, D-Monongalia, Senate cochair of the committee. The survey will be distributed soon.

"As a veteran," said Hunter, also chair of the Senate's committee on military affairs, "I believe the best way to find out what are the problems of our returning veterans and what do they recommend we do to assist them is to go directly to the veterans themselves. ... I encourage all vets who receive the survey to complete it and return it, not just for themselves, but for the thousands of returning veterans and their families."

Fleischauer said there have been improvements in medical care since the Vietnam era, but those military personnel who are injured in today's wars have more serious injuries. During the height of the Vietnam era, about 29 percent of those injured died. Today, 9 percent do not survive injuries from combat or combat-related operations.

There have been 27 deaths of West Virginia personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan, five of them identified as suicides, she said.

"We have gotten much better at saving people's lives, but the flip side of that is many of those who survive have very serious injuries," she said.

Fleischauer said 10,000 people from West Virginia serve in the military. The state boasts one of the highest percentages in the nation of people serving, she said.

Since 2002, 906 West Virginians have been treated for post-traumatic stress disorder syndrome.

"It was our intention to put the weight of state government behind ensuring that those suffering from PTSD, traumatic brain injuries and other injuries typical of this conflict did not get lost in the system," she said, "especially those who live in more rural areas with less access to medical and counseling services."

Roy Tunick, a WVU counseling psychology professor and president of the West Virginia Psychological Association, helped create the survey. The questions address experiences returning veterans may have had that could affect their adjustment to civilian life.

"We have more people surviving the horror of a battlefield than ever before," he said, "so the survivors not only have the impact of their experience, but also are facing physical and psychological adjustments, which also impact their family. So the survey is for them to assess as well as report difficulties they are having and services they may need."

Tunick described post-traumatic stress as a reaction in which the person has "experienced a potentially life

threatening situation," Tunick said.

Fleischauer said the more a person is redeployed, the more likely he or she will develop PTSD.

"The thing is, some of our veterans have been deployed four and five times; that makes it harder on them to serve and recover," she said. "Imagine it if someone was killed next you by an IED [improved explosive device]. It would be a difficult and gruesome thing to recover from that tragic event during another tour of duty."

Tunick said PTSD symptoms include irritability, outbursts of anger, difficulty sleeping, problems with maintaining concentration and a sense of hyperawareness of things around the veteran.

Tunick recalled how one Vietnam veteran he was treating reacted when he heard the crinkling sound of a bag of potato chips being opened by one of his children.

"The man thought it was soldiers walking through the brush," he said.

When the survey results are complete, the committee will provide recommendations to the Legislature's Joint Committee on Government and Finance regarding legislation to be introduced during the 2008 session, which begins in January.