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## Team 4: War Vets Fighting Govt. For Disability Benefits

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The following is a transcript of a report by Team 4 investigator Paul Van Osdol that first aired Feb. 22, 2007, on WTAE Channel 4 Action News at 5:30 p.m.

More than 23,000 American soldiers have been injured in Iraq and Afghanistan. Nearly 1,000 have lost a limb, and amazingly, a Team 4 Investigation found many of those injured veterans are now fighting the U.S. government for disability benefits.



Team 4's Paul Van Osdol has more on the story.

It all comes down to this: The Veterans Administration is clogged with hundreds of thousands of claims, and that logjam is forcing some of our wounded soldiers to wait more than a full year to get the benefits due them.

Roadside bombs, snipers, mortars, death and injury stalk American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Sgt. Doug Gindlesperger of the U.S. Army

National Guard led security patrols in Iraq knowing at any moment that he could be in immediate danger.

In 2005 he was flown out of Iraq, suffering from post-traumatic stress.

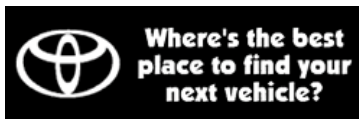
Years later, driving down country roads near his Somerset County home, Gindlesperger said he still has flashbacks.

"They used a lot of animals for explosive devices over there and being in Somerset County, being a deer hunter, seeing a road kill, it gives you that flash, know what I mean?" said Gindlesperger.

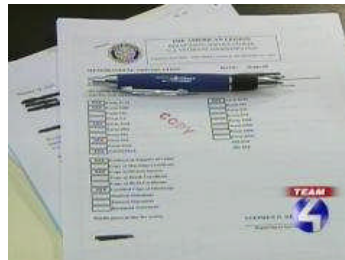
But 18 months after coming home, Gindlesperger is still fighting the Veterans Administration over his disability claim.

"It kind of puts a bad taste in your mouth," said Gindlesperger. "You're wondering to yourself, are they really trying to help me and get me through this and get me the benefits I need and deserve and take care of medications, or are they just blowing me off?"

Gindlesperger has plenty of company. Government documents obtained by Team 4 shows more than 30,000 veterans injured in Iraq and Afghanistan have pending disability claims. Hundreds are local, and the numbers continue to grow.



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Stephen Dennison of the American Legion helps injured veterans in western Pennsylvania file claims.

He said wounded warriors deserve better.

"Then you come back to the United States, and you get out of the service, and you have to go through a hassle to get your benefits?" said Dennison. "That's not the way the government should take care of veterans."

Former Sgt. Dean Nist of the U.S. Marine reserves ran street patrols in Fallujah for seven months.

"And I personally lost two of my own guys in Iraq, and that still weighs heavy with me today," said Nist.

Like Gindlesperger, Nist was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress.

"My little boy, 6 years old, likes to play and comes up and scares me," said Nist. "It sets you off, puts you in a whole different mindset."

Nist said waiting for his disability benefits only adds to his stress.

"I sent in my application July of 06," said Nist. "Until present, I'm still waiting to hear back."

Team 4 wanted to ask the VA why so many veterans are being forced to wait so long, but the agency refused Team 4's repeated requests for an interview. Instead the head of the VA at the Federal Building in Downtown Pittsburgh sent a prepared statement.

VA administrator Mari Beth Cully said one-third of the agency's Pittsburgh employees retired in the past two years. The vacancies are being filled, but she said, "Extensive training is required before these employees are fully productive. Therefore, our workload has increased during this transition."

"It's going to affect the veterans financially for the money they should be getting, not only for themselves, but their family," said U.S. Army Ranger Jeremy Feldbusch, of Blairsville.

In April 2003, at the beginning of the Iraq war, shrapnel hit him, causing permanent blindness and brain damage.

Feldbusch's parents spent two months with him while he recovered in a hospital.

Last November, Showtime aired a documentary about his recovery.

Feldbusch has become a national spokesman for wounded Iraq veterans, leading an effort to lobby Congress for a new disability insurance program.

He personally was able to get his VA benefits, but he said he is disturbed that too many other veterans are suffering.

"With over 20,000 injuries and serious injuries, and the number still rising today, these people are going to be part of our lives and part of our social structure," said Feldbusch. "So we need to pick up the slack, and take care of business."

Sen. Arlen Specter, a member of the Veterans Affairs committee said he promised to take action.

"The budget shortfalls have left the administrators shorthanded, but there's no excuse for not having checks for the disabled veterans, and we're going to get it corrected," said Specter.

But the problem affects veterans of all wars, totaling more than 400,000 total. About 7,000 are in western Pennsylvania, many who fought in World War II, Korea and Vietnam. In some cases, while their claims work their way through the bureaucracy, the veterans are dying.

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