

Vets need to seek out benefits

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Many veterans have no real notion of the benefits they have earned or deserve for having served in America's military.

What's more, the Veterans Administration, the federal agency whose mission is to provide those benefits, is not required to seek out vets and tell them about possible entitlements.

One of the little-known benefits could be of incalculable worth to veterans in their declining years — and to their families.

This is called the Aid and Attendance pension benefit, and until recently, not many veterans were aware of it.

That's not unusual, according to Mike Miskell, commander of American Legion District 11 and the legion's national historian.

"Unfortunately," Mr. Miskell said, "most vets are ignorant about their benefits. The VA isn't going to knock on their door and drag them to their desks."

Certified service officers belonging to veterans' organizations like the legion may be aware of the benefits, Mr. Miskell said, but if veterans are not members, they still may not know what they could be entitled to.

So, many veterans don't know about the Aid and Attendance benefit, which helps pay for long-term care with assisted living, including having another person to assist in eating, bathing, dressing and undressing and other tasks.

It pays up to \$1,470 per month to a qualified veteran and \$945 to a surviving spouse. Or, a couple can receive up to \$1,743 monthly to defray the expense of long-term care.

There is a list of qualifications, chief among them being that a veteran must have served during wartime, though they need not have seen combat.

The qualifications include demonstrating financial need and having no more than \$80,000 in assets, not counting the family home.

After an application is completed, six months or so could elapse before eligibility is determined, according to a veterans' Web site, www.VeteranAid.org, which has been alerting many vets to the benefit.

Service officers such as Tom Bradley, executive director of the Lackawanna County Veterans Affairs Office, and aides from the Governor's Veterans Outreach and Assistance Center, West Pittston, and the Vet Center, 1002 Pittston Ave., try to inform vets about their benefits by regularly visiting veteran organization sites, but they can't reach everyone.

The legion, Mr. Miskell said, has been first and foremost in the fight to preserve what benefits vets have; educating vets on benefits they have coming; and in petitioning Congress to enhance or expand on the benefits that are in place.

Mr. Miskell said many more veterans could take advantage of membership.

"Only 18 percent of the eligible veterans belong to the American Legion," he said. "So we are reaching less than one in five."

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