

VA simplifies PTSD claims for some veterans

By Kelly Kennedy - Staff writer

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The Department of Veterans Affairs has scrapped a policy requiring combat veterans to verify in writing that they have witnessed or experienced a traumatic event before they can file a claim for post-traumatic stress disorder — but only if the military has already diagnosed them with PTSD.

“This change provides a fairer process for veterans with service-connected PTSD,” Sen. Daniel Akaka, D-Hawaii, said in a written statement. “[It] leaves claim adjudicators more time to devote to reducing the staggering backlog of veterans’ claims.”

In the past, a veteran has needed written verification — a statement from a commander or doctor, or testimony from co-workers — that he or she was involved in a traumatic situation to receive disability compensation from VA if they had not already been diagnosed by the military during a disability retirement process. But PTSD is the only condition that a veteran must “reprove” to receive disability benefits from VA.

“They don’t have to reprove their diabetes,” said Mary Ellen McCarthy, special projects counsel for the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee. “They don’t have to reprove a leg injury. I have never seen any other condition diagnosed in service [for which] people had to reprove their injury.”

The VA regulation was written at a time when the military was not diagnosing PTSD among troops, McCarthy said.

She travels to VA regional offices to check the progress of veterans going through the disability claims system. Even though many of the former troops had already proven they had witnessed a traumatic event in writing as they went through the military disability retirement system, often that paperwork had been lost by the time they reached VA, McCarthy said.

“It could take months to get that paperwork,” she said.

That slows up the paperwork process. And the veteran has to go through the stressful process of reproving that they lived through a roadside bomb explosion or that they witnessed a friend’s death or that they killed an insurgent.

“Revisiting those stressors in a non-therapeutic environment can make the diagnosis worse,” McCarthy said.

Akaka said he asked VA Secretary Dr. James Peake if the rule was necessary and requested that it be removed, and Peake agreed.

“I am pleased that the secretary took quick action to reverse this requirement after it was brought to his attention,” Akaka said.

Peake has already informed VA regional offices of the decision, Akaka said. VA officials could not be reached for comment by press time.