

VA outreach lags as many veterans are unaware of benefits

Many veterans aren't sure what's due them

An analysis of Department of Veterans Affairs survey data shows many veterans say they have little or no understanding of the benefits due them. Highlights of the survey:

■ Understand a lot, some about benefits ■ Understand a little, none

Period of service	Health care benefits		Education benefits		Life insurance benefits	
World War II Dec. 1941-Dec. 1946	38%	62%	42	58	34	66
Korean War July 1950-Jan. 1955	36	64	41	59	27	73
Vietnam era Aug. 1964-April 1975	37	63	43	57	18	82
Persian Gulf War era Aug. 1990-Aug. 2001	42	58	43	57	29	71
Afghanistan, Iraq wars September 2001 or later	48	52	59	41	35	65

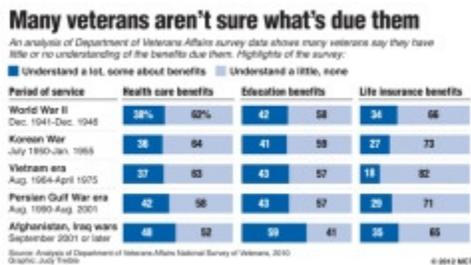
Source: Analysis of Department of Veterans Affairs National Survey of Veterans, 2010
Graphic: Judy Treible

© 2012 MCT

By CHRIS ADAMS
McClatchy Newspapers
Published: November 19, 2012

Related

- [GAO: Troops transitioning out not always getting prompt pain and psychiatric meds](#)



MCT

WASHINGTON — More than half of America's veterans say they have little or no understanding of the benefits due them, despite efforts over recent years to match returning soldiers with the help and services they need.

An analysis of Department of Veterans Affairs survey data found that younger veterans — those who served in the post-9/11 war period — are better versed in their benefits. But even among those veterans, 40 percent say they have little or no understanding of their benefits, a figure that climbs to two-thirds for those unfamiliar with life insurance benefits available.

The VA said it's working hard to boost benefits awareness and has taken steps in recent years to do so.

“We want to accept them into the VA. We want to help them,” said Joseph Curtin, who recently became the VA's director of outreach.

One major change will come Wednesday when a new law will mandate all departing service members go through a series of detailed benefits sessions. Until now, participation in such sessions varied by service and was often optional.

The VA had been reaching 150,000 service members per year; under the mandatory, beefed-up, sessions, that is expected to rise to 307,000.

America's veterans are eligible for a range of benefits, from access to the VA's well-regarded medical system to lifetime payments for disabilities suffered during military service to access to education, life insurance and home loan programs.

But VA data show that participation varies widely by geography. In addition, a veteran's understanding of what's available varies greatly by period of service.

McClatchy Newspapers analyzed the VA's 2010 National Survey of Veterans, conducted about every 10 years to determine the state of America's veterans. Included are several questions about veterans' health coverage as well as understanding of the VA benefits package. McClatchy also reviewed benefits data by state in 2011, the most recent year available.

When asked about the VA benefits, veterans' responses are all over the map, depending on their age and the benefit in question.

Among all veterans, 59 percent said their understanding of available benefits was “a little” or “not at all,” according to the analysis of the VA's survey data.

But there were some wide swings:

- Among older veterans, including those from Vietnam, Korea and World War II, 55 percent or more have little or no understanding of their benefits; among veterans from the period between Korea and Vietnam, lack of understanding shot to 65 percent.
- Among younger veterans, 40 percent had little or no understanding.
- Asked specifically about life insurance benefits, 80 percent said they have little or no understanding of them — including 62 percent who said they have no understanding at all.

- Asked about education benefits, younger veterans — who would be most likely to use them — have far greater understanding of what’s available than their older brethren. Even so, 41 percent said they have little or no understanding of those benefits, which include several different and sometimes overlapping programs.

In 2011, the Government Accountability Office pointed to the complexity of the VA’s education programs as a possible factor that kept more veterans from participating. The GAO said that although outreach efforts were widespread, “little is known about the effectiveness” of those efforts, since the VA didn’t have a way to measure its outreach performance.

Some veterans told the GAO they were forced to wait too long or had to call several times to get information from the VA’s hotlines; a high percentage of the attempted calls met a busy signal. Further, some veterans and their advocates told the GAO that briefings for separating service members were not effective and often provided too much information to readily digest.

The GAO recommended the VA establish new performance measures and improve communication with colleges where veterans enroll. The VA said last week it was putting the GAO’s recommendations into place.

Lack of outreach could help explain why the participation in VA programs is so disparate across the country.

The VA has long grappled with widely divergent assessments in the disability awards it gives veterans. The VA first confronted this problem in 2005, when news organizations reported that veterans’ monthly checks varied widely depending on where they lived.

Beyond that, though, is the general issue of what percentage of veterans even participate in the program.

Among the VA’s disability compensation program, for example, 25 percent of veterans in Nebraska participate, while only 10 percent of those in Connecticut do so.

In the life insurance program, participation goes from 8 percent in New Jersey to 2 percent in Alaska, according to 2011 VA data.

The VA said it’s working to boost awareness of all its benefits programs, and it said that most of the variation it can explain deals with population differences by state — such as the percentage of a state’s population that is retired military.

The most significant change will come this week, when the VA and the Pentagon start the revamped briefings for service members transitioning to civilian life. The VA also will make the briefings available in monthly webinars.

The efforts will go a long way toward eliminating the problem of veterans who don’t understand their benefits, said Danny Pummill, who oversees the VA’s transition assistance program.

But while the briefings should capture a greater amount of younger veterans and keep their participation rates relatively high, they don't address the soldiers and sailors who left military service after World War II, Korea, Vietnam or other periods.

"Sometimes there's this warrior ethic — I served proudly and didn't get hurt," said Curtin. "Those benefits are for somebody else. There's a mentality and pride and they don't look into their benefits. ... We've got to reach out to World War II, Korean and Vietnam veterans who might never have looked at these benefits before."