Pentagon, Army leaders deny holding back disability funds

By Kelly Kennedy
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The military medical disability evaluation system, which has taken a firestorm of criticism in recent months, took fresh fire April 12 from lawmakers who pointedly wondered if low disability ratings for some service members can really be attributed to simple bureaucracy.

"It's not just confusing," said Carl Levin, D-Mich., chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. "It's unfair. It's unjust."

Levin co-chaired a joint hearing of the Senate armed services and veterans' affairs committees.

After James Scott, chairman of the Veterans' Disability Benefits Commission, showed how disability ratings differ markedly among the services, based on a report from the Center for Naval Analyses, Levin said he wanted to know more about why the Department of Veterans Affairs would give higher disability ratings to soldiers for injuries that the Army had assigned lower ratings.

Scott testified that 87 percent of 50,676 soldiers in the CAN report were rated at lower than 30 percent — the percentage needed for a lifetime paycheck and medical benefits, rather than only a severance check. And more than 13,000 soldiers were found unfit for continued service, but were rated at zero percent. VA gave those same soldiers an average disability rating of 56 percent.

Scott said he believed the low ratings were deliberately decided to keep Pentagon budget costs lower. "I believe the Army has a strong incentive to rate at less than 30 percent," he said.

Deputy Defense Secretary Gordon England denied that.

"There's no incentive to do that," he said. "We try to treat people fairly and accurately."

But during questioning, England said he was not familiar with a report from the Government Accountability Office that looked at inconsistencies in the rating systems or with statistics showing disparities among the services reported by the Veterans' Disability Benefits Commission in March.

England said he would expect some inconsistencies among ratings because the services have different rules and their members have different requirements to do their jobs.

But Arlen Specter, R-Pa., didn't fully buy that.

"Because of budget constraints, there are pressures on the evaluating personnel to hold back — at least a little," he said.

He suggested defense officials evaluate whether the funding available for wounded returning veterans is adequate.

"I do think it's a good idea," England said. "But from my chair, there's no budget constraint in this area. With that said, I'm sometimes surprised by the things that happen in this very, very large system."

Patty Murray, D-Wash., said that when she talks with soldiers in her state, they tell her they run into walls.

"The frustration is so high among people who feel like the system is against them," she said. "There is a lot of concern that the DoD is deliberately under-rating disabilities. Many of them feel … deliberately low-balled."

She said she's particularly concerned about the low number of permanent disability retirements.

Acting Army Secretary Pete Geren acknowledged that the system has problems, but also denied that any cases were deliberately rated low.

"The system needs a radical overhaul," Geren said. "The system doesn't work for soldiers and their families today. Outpatient care has not been up to standard, and we're working to make it so." □

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