

# Guardsmen, reservists say health care system failing

## Soldiers: Some on West Coast fall through cracks

By Kelly Kennedy

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After a 2005 Government Accountability Office report showed the Army often dropped injured National Guard and reserve troops from its active-duty rolls, causing lapses in medical care and pay, Army officials thought they had the problem licked.

They expanded the Community-Based Health Care Organization so more soldiers could head home for their convalescence, rather than be stuck at military hospitals far from their families.

They assigned enough counselors to ensure soldiers made their appointments and were accounted for on the pay and benefit rolls. They made sure there were Tricare or Department of Veterans Affairs health services near the soldiers' homes.

But now, soldiers, lawyers and an Army officer who works in the CBHCO system say National

Guard and reserve soldiers on the West Coast aren't receiving exit physicals, aren't being referred to a medical evaluation board for a chance at disability retirement, are still being dropped from the rolls, and are not receiving specialized care for post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injuries.

And, because they are not assigned to a unit, there's no command structure to make sure the system is taking care of them.

"After I fell off [active-duty] orders, I was screwed," said Scott Olson, who caught his foot in a winch and tore it open in Iraq in 2004. "I've been fighting this since June 2005. I lost my house. I lost everything. I don't even have my dog anymore."

Critics say they know what the problems are: the distances soldiers travel for care at their own expense; struggles to establish who has responsibility for the soldiers — the regular Army or their

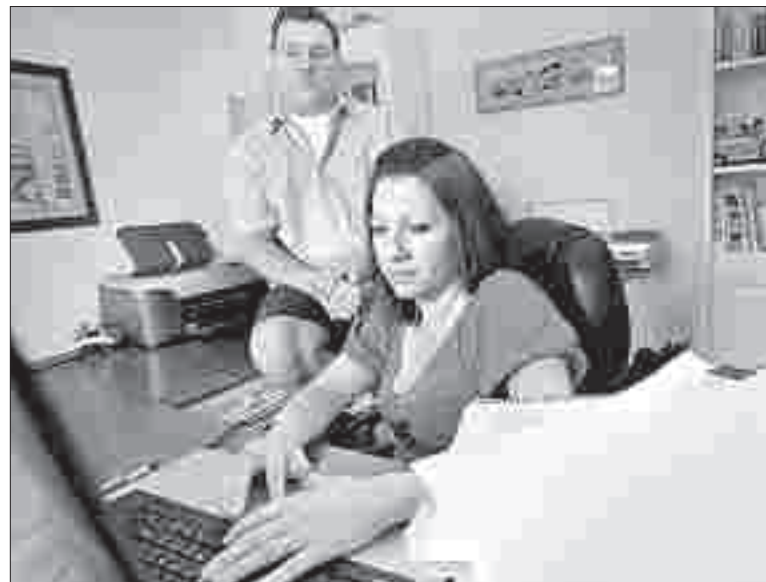
state National Guard hierarchies; lack of interaction with the soldiers' units; and unclear policy.

Army officials said they can't speak about individual cases. But they also chose not to respond to questions about the program posed by Military Times.

Olson's complaint comes just as Defense Secretary Robert Gates' Independent Review Group issued a draft report calling on the Army to "build the success of the Community Based Health Care Organization program and expand where possible."

The group also said the other services "should be encouraged to use this program."

Olson said after being in the medical holdover unit at Fort Lewis as he was treated for his injury, he entered the CBHCO program in September 2004. But after a year, his active-duty orders ran out — as they are meant to, according to policy.



KARIE HAMILTON

**Katie Morissette works on her laptop as her husband, Bill Morissette, looks on at their home office in Yelm, Wash., where they run Operation Golden Soldier.**

But the regulation also states soldiers will not be extended past 365 days "without being entered into the physical disability evaluation system" — a key missing step in Olson's and other soldiers' cases. "Hundreds in California ... have fallen off of orders," Olson said. "A lot of people were so fed up, they just left. All the Army cares about are the numbers."

"The soldiers are being truthful," said an Army officer who works within the CBHCO system and asked not to be named. "It takes courage to change the system and change the leaders causing the problems."

The officer said he believes soldiers are dropped from the rolls to hold down the costs of caring for them, which mount each day they stay on active duty, and to deter them from seeking disability retirement benefits.

The officer said a Pentagon-level investigation into the CBHCO is ongoing.

Before attaching soldiers to a home-based care unit, garrison commanders are supposed to make sure they complete the first two phases of their out-processing as active-duty soldiers — even though they'll still be considered active-duty on CBHCO.

This includes finishing their out-processing check sheet and DD 214s, their discharge papers. The unsigned DD 214 is mailed to the reservists after they've finished the CBHCO program. But soldiers say that means they aren't getting an exit physical to determine if they qualify for disability evaluation.

"I've faced dead ends since 2005," said Army National Guard Sgt. William Mathers. "I don't want anything to do with the military ever again."

Mathers, a National Guard soldier who served in Iraq with the 1498th Transportation Company out of California, said he did not receive an out-processing physical, and the Army released him from active-duty orders before he

started the medical evaluation board process to find out if he was still fit for service. He injured his back in Iraq, but begged to stay with his unit, which he did.

When he returned home, he sought medical care. But his back surgery left him feeling worse than he did before. He was placed in CBHCO, but after a year, he called to report in and was told he was no longer on active duty.

"They released us all before we fell into the [disability retirement] process," he said. "They messed me over, and they're messing over a bunch of other soldiers."

Mathers' dad, retired Marine Command Sgt. Maj. James Hall, said he went to the California governor's office, as well as to National Guard officials to try to speed up the process.

"We weren't getting anywhere," Hall said. "Nothing moved for a year."

He watched as the Army lost his son's paperwork, required him to travel at his own expense to try to straighten out the administrative mess and — under what Hall said were false pretenses — locked his son into a psychiatric ward.

The family believes Mathers was locked up to see if he could be discharged under a pre-existing mental disorder.

"We expected someone to take ownership of these soldiers," Hall said. "There was no one."

Sgt. Joe Baumann was in Iraq with the 184th Infantry, a Guard unit out of California, when he went on patrol to look for a sniper who had shot one of his buddies. This time, the sniper shot Baumann in the stomach.

"After Baumann got shot, I figured he was recovering and OK," said Jesse Miller, a civilian attorney. "Then I heard about the problems he was having and offered to help. I thought it would be a few letters, but it turned into all-consuming litigation."

Miller is also a major in the

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