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Parker said he believes the medical evaluation board members decided to keep him in uniform because, unlike the airman, he had reached retirement eligibility and would be paid whether he stayed active or left the service. Booth's low disability rating meant the Defense Department did not have to pay him retirement or disability pay.

**Equal treatment**

Parker's not arguing that Booth, who also takes Enbrel, should have kept his job. Rather, he just wants service members to be treated the same.

The proposed legislation in the defense authorization bill would do just that.

As he continued his research, Parker began posting information about the physical evaluation board process on a Web site for the Spondylitis Association of America at <http://www.spondylitis.org/> and about a dozen men contacted him asking for help.

But rather than just tell the airmen, soldiers and sailors what to do, he volunteered to go through their paperwork, typed up point-papers to help them support their cases and met with their lawyers and counselors to explain the disease and the regula-

tions that applied to it.

If necessary, he went to the evaluation boards with them. If they had already gone through the process, he wrote letters to doctors, Veterans Affairs Department officials and politicians to help the service members appeal their decisions.

Why do this? "No one else is," Parker explained. "With the war, the lawyers are backlogged and not well-informed about how the law works with all these different diseases."

In its March report, the GAO pinpointed several problems in the medical evaluation process:

■ The Defense Department and the services do not have a consistent system in place to monitor the way cases are handled.

■ The services do not have a formal training system set up for the people who help troops through the physical evaluation board process.

■ The Army does not keep good statistics on how long it takes to process soldiers' physical evaluation boards, so it can't be determined whether they are handled in a timely fashion.

The Defense Department agreed with the recommendations, and William J. Carr, acting deputy undersecretary for military personnel policy, responded in a March 9 letter that the department would implement all of the GAO's recommendations.

Parker said the report hits on a lot of problems, but not all of them.

He points out that to receive retirement pay, a service member has to be rated at 30 percent disability or higher. That qualification is important for the

monthly stipend, and more important, the lifelong medical benefits. Enbrel can cost \$20,000 a year.

**Full disclosure**

In February, Army Capt. James Wollman received a severance package of \$23,000 — no retirement benefits — because his physical evaluation board determined that his ankylosing spondylitis was a pre-existing condition.

He — and Parker — say it was not. Wollman's symptoms surfaced during physical training as an ROTC cadet in 1992.

**'With the war, the lawyers are backlogged and not well-informed about how the law works with all these different diseases.'**

LT. COL MIKE PARKER

At the time the pain was ruled not to be spondylitis, a ruling that was repeated in a 2001 exam when Wollman experienced similar pain.

He suffered similar symptoms again in 2003 while on a combat tour in Iraq, which led to a move from his position as a field artillery officer to a desk job. This time, he was diagnosed with spondylitis.

Meanwhile, he learned that his deployment medical records had been lost.

When Wollman started the medical evaluation board process, he told the doctors that he had received a waiver to get into the military. In fact, he realized later, there was no waiver. His college doctor said a waiver was unnecessary and that he was fit for duty.

The board used the waiver to show Wollman's pain came from a pre-existing condition, which means he can't be medically retired from the military and therefore can't receive medical benefits. Instead, he was found unfit for duty and processed out. He's awaiting his Veterans Affairs board to find out if he qualifies for benefits. When Parker found out, he walked Wollman through the regulations to try to help him with his case.

The proposed legislation could make sure soldiers like Wollman receive full documentation so that it's easier for them to say, "Hey, that's not right."

**'A system gone astray'**

In Wollman's case, the waiver error might have come out earlier if the board had been required to document it.

Lt. Col. Marie Dominguez, a surgeon with the 1st Armored Division, wrote a letter to the physical evaluation board on Wollman's behalf.

"I believe his findings have been based on an incomplete medical history and factual errors included on the narrative summary that were prejudicial to a fair and unbiased hearing," she wrote. "To me, it is an injustice to thoroughly evaluate someone for a condition, determine that it does not exist, bring them on active duty for seven-and-a-half years, and then determine that the illness existed all along, and that, therefore, he will not receive any VA coverage for the illness, nor qualify for insurance coverage under most policies."

But the letter brought about no change.

Disabled American Veterans spokesman Reese said the story isn't unusual.

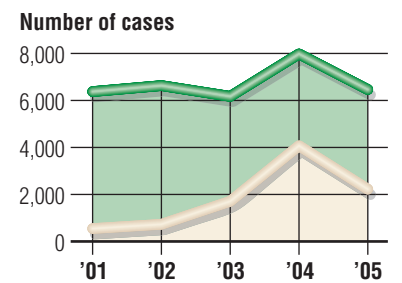
"It can be a really trying time for people who are hurt to start with," he said. "We've been doing this since Vietnam, so it's nothing new for us. The inequities really come to light when you've got so many people going through the system."

**DISABILITY EVALUATIONS**

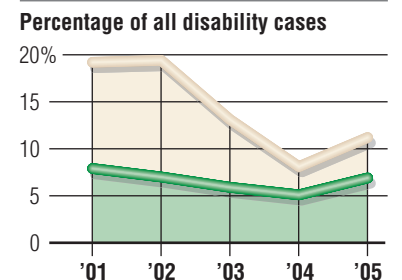
The Government Accountability Office has recommended the Defense Department improve oversight of how the individual services evaluate and process disability claims to speed case resolution and make sure troops are treated the same.

Active duty Reserve duty

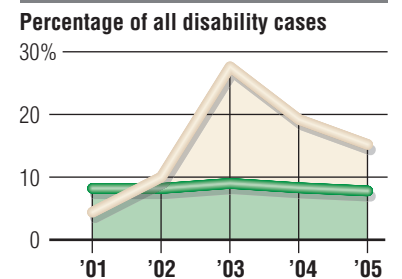
**ARMY DISABILITY CASES BY YEAR**



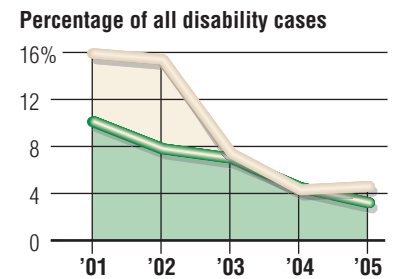
**DEEMED FIT AND RETURNED TO SERVICE**



**SEPARATED FROM SERVICE WITHOUT BENEFITS**



**GIVEN PERMANENT DISABILITY**



Source: Government Accountability Office analysis of the Army's Physical Disability Case Processing System

JOHN HARMAN, TIMES STAFF

As he waits to see if the changes to the defense authorization bill will make it through the process, Parker continues to post messages seeking out service members who need his help.

"Most of them wanted to stay in and serve their country," Parker said. "But the culture is 'They're sick, lame and lazy: You're not getting a retirement out of us.' This is only a tiny example of a system gone astray, and I think someone needs to call the Army on this." □

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