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The debt we owe to US veterans

Iraq and Afghanistan vets face rising unemployment, homelessness and medical problems. We must do more to help



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It's payback time. Declaring that "we owe a debt to all who serve," President Barack Obama officially [unveiled a new GI bill](#) for the post-9/11 generation of veterans on Monday at a [rally at George Mason University](#) in northern Virginia. Depending on the length of service, the education programme pays up to 100% of a veteran's in-state undergraduate tuition, fees and other charges at public colleges and universities.

But not every [Iraq](#) or [Afghanistan](#) veteran heads to the classroom. During a recent morning bus commute, an animated young man tried to engage the older woman sitting across the aisle. He talked loudly. She just nodded. That didn't stop the one-way chatter, so I tuned out – until I heard the word "Iraq". The special forces veteran had been back for one month. Already he missed the adrenaline rush of jumping out of planes at night. Now, instead of giving orders, he took them at a local coffee shop. His stories tumbled out in run-on sentences delivered in a breathless, machine gun-like cadence.

"Your father was never the same after he came back from Vietnam," my mother once said. Today soldiers escape the abuse that sometimes greeted Vietnam veterans, but Americans are only slowly coming to grips with the emotional and social struggles facing the nearly two million men and women who have served since September 11. "When our service members do return home, it will be to an America that always welcomes them home with the care that they were promised," said the president [told military families](#) at a White House Fourth of July celebration.

What kind of care can veterans expect beyond education benefits? Advances in battlefield medicine mean that soldiers today survive horrific injuries that would have killed them in the Vietnam war. Yet the quality of care for wounded veterans has been under scrutiny since [Washington Post](#) reporters discovered returning veterans receiving substandard care in decrepit, vermin-ridden facilities at the [Walter Reed Army Medical Centre](#) in the nation's capital two years ago.

New veterans, many of whom who have completed multiple tours of duty, face psychological challenges that civilians cannot imagine. Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are turning to the US department of veterans affairs healthcare system in record numbers, according to a [new American Journal of Public Health](#) study on veterans' mental health diagnoses. Of the 289,328 veterans who entered VA care from 2002 to 2008, nearly 37% had mental health problems, including post traumatic stress disorder (about 22%) and depression (roughly 17%).

"Weekend warriors" over 30 years old in the national guard and reserves who left stable family, work and community environments for combat zones were especially susceptible to mental health problems. A recent US government accountability office report found that [nearly 20% of women veterans suffer from PTSD](#).

Some 120,000 vets and their families have received counselling, and some 3,000 have been "rescued" since a VA suicide-prevention hotline came into service two years ago. Spikes in suicides among its active-duty personnel prompted the US army to fund the largest ever study of suicide and mental health in the military.

Yet despite this unprecedented spotlight on veterans' mental health, there will be people like my father, who obsessed about suicide and medicated himself with cigarettes and movies about the second world war on TV, who won't admit that their wartime experiences have profoundly changed their lives.

Kenneth Isaksen, the managing director of OIF/OEF Veterans of Massachusetts, a non-profit organisation that advocates for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, wonders if the VA was prepared for the numbers of veterans requiring services. "The VA does a good job, but they could do better," he said. He sees a danger of people slipping through the cracks and would like the VA to upgrade facilities and hire more staff. "Post traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury are affecting more guys than we know," says the marine corps veteran who served in Afghanistan. "Diagnosis is tough and symptoms may not be apparent right away."

The Great Recession also poses hurdles in employment and housing. The June 2009 unemployment rate for veterans serving since September 2001 was slightly higher than nonveterans: 9.4% versus 9.3%, according to bureau of labour statistics data. But some veterans have complained that they're finding expertise gained in the military doesn't really mesh with jobs civilian employers want to fill.

There are an estimated 3,700 veterans living on the streets, out of a homeless veteran population of about 200,000, according to VA figures cited in a recent New York Times story. Almost 10% of men and women who've served since September 11 are paying more than 50% of their income in rent which puts them at risk for losing shelter. These issues aren't going away any time soon. "This is not a 10-year problem. It is a 50- or 60-year or 70-year problem." Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, has warned.

The question is what to do. The Obama administration has proposed a \$112.8bn fiscal 2010 Veterans Affairs budget, a 15.5% increase over 2009, the largest single increase in more than three decades. Healthcare eligibility has been expanded, and hundreds of millions of dollars have been allocated to homelessness, mental health and women veterans' programmes.

There are moves in other areas as well. Men and women ordered to stay in their units beyond scheduled separation dates under "stop-loss" policies can expect special retroactive allowances. As part of the package of federal stimulus programmes targeting veterans, one-time payments of \$250 are being made to eligible veterans and their beneficiaries and employers can receive a \$2,400 federal tax credit for hiring certain veterans. In July, the US labour department awarded \$7.5m in job training grants to 17 states.

Isaksen credited the administration with making the right moves but still sees the federal government in a transition phase, doing a better job with job creation, veterans' entrepreneurship and tax incentives. That leaves the states to patch the holes in the welcome mat. Since the scope of post-discharge follow up varies from branch to branch, in Massachusetts, all returning veterans are contacted by telephone and every municipality has veterans' services officers to help them navigate available state and federal resources. Nearly 7,000 veterans and their families have taken advantage of the

Bay State's suicide prevention and advocacy programme. Of 655 veterans who have been assessed for mental health disorders, 75% served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Other states are expanding existing tax relief and employment programmes. Last November, Oklahoma voters approved a measure exempting certain disabled veterans or their surviving spouses from personal property taxes. New York voters passed a plan that adds points to disabled veterans' scores on civil service employment exams.

But going from night-time missions to serving up coffee isn't the ideal way to re-integrate Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. The country still has a long way to go to cushion re-entry into the civilian world for its battle-scarred men and women. If this debt can ever really be honoured, they'll need payback of a different sort.

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