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Help for Damaged Warriors

For too long, scores of thousands of veterans afflicted with post-traumatic stress disorder have been denied proper treatment and much-needed help. While routinely hailed as heroes in home-front salutes, only about half of the more than 150,000 men and women diagnosed with P.T.S.D. — suffering flashbacks, emotional numbness and other debilitating symptoms — have been approved for disability claims by the veterans department.

The Obama administration has announced new regulations that will eliminate one of the main bureaucratic roadblocks to adequate treatment: the requirement that they document in painstaking, often impossible searches such events as a specific bomb blast or firefight to prove their disability. Claimants will now have to just show that they served in a war zone in a job consistent with the events underlying their symptoms.

Veterans' groups point out that these rules have been particularly unfair to veterans, many of them women, who did not serve in official combat roles but still saw traumatic duty.

By some estimates, of the more than two million service members deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001, one out of five veterans suffer P.T.S.D. The changes would also apply to Vietnam veterans.

Concerns have been expressed about the cost — an estimated \$5 billion over seven years, with heightened health care and monthly support ranging from a few hundred dollars to \$2,000. The plight of damaged veterans is a debt that must be paid in full.

The veterans department will review all cases, promising vigilance to discourage fraudulent claims. The new approach will be no simple task for an agency struggling with backlogs of veterans' claims. Final determinations will be made by the department's own psychological

experts. They will have to be mindful that the ultimate goal is to treat symptoms and guide veterans closer to normal life, not sidetrack them into permanent dependency.