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If Veterans don't help Veterans, who will?

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May 10, 2013

Senator Boxer
Senator Feinstein
Congresswoman Sanchez
President Obama

Dear Senators Boxer & Feinstein and Congresswoman Sanchez and President Obama:

As your constituent I write to ask that you join efforts by Senator John Tester and Representative Chellie Pingree to address an inequity in the law concerning veterans who experienced military sexual trauma (MST) while serving our nation.

As you know, military sexual trauma, including sexual assault, is at an epidemic level. The Department of Defense estimates that as many as 17,000 - 20,000 such incidents occur annually in today's military service branches, the vast majority of which are never reported by victims.

Once individual service members leave active duty, many file disability claims and seek counseling and health care from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). VA currently is providing care for about 100,000 such cases. Those who file claims for VA disability are routinely denied because of the absence of documentary evidence in veterans' military service records.

In 2011, VA relaxed its evidentiary standards for claims received from combat veterans who are diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); as a result, hundreds of thousands of these veterans saw their claims quickly approved. However, VA did not include PTSD from MST in this more relaxed method of resolving mental health claims. Thus, MST claims must still exhibit three key elements: diagnosis by a qualified mental health professional; existence of a documented "stressor" sufficient to cause PTSD; and, establishment of a direct relationship (called "nexus") between the diagnosis of PTSD and the stressor event. Without confirming records that a sexual assault occurred, these veterans' claims are routinely denied.

The Tester-Pingree bill (S. 294/H.R. 671) would mandate that VA use the same regulatory framework in adjudicating MST claims as it does in adjudicating PTSD combat claims. This bill carries broad support by the veterans service organization community and other groups concerned about military sexual trauma.

I urge you to co-sponsor and vote to enact this important bill, and that you provide me a report of the actions you intend to take to advance this bill to a final vote.

Respectfully,

Jim Davis
Founder & CEO
Veterans-For-Change, Inc.

