

US veterans sue over 'poor care'

By Maggie Shiels
BBC News, San Francisco

US veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are suing the government, claiming inadequate care is leading to an increase in suicides.

A San Francisco court will hear the class action lawsuit against the Department of Veteran Affairs.

The veterans say the department has been unable to deal with the growing incidence of depression and suicides.

But government lawyers argue the department has been devoting more resources to mental health.

In court papers the two non-profit groups representing the veterans write "that failure to provide care is manifesting itself in an epidemic of suicides".

"The bottom line is that we're not taking care of the veterans and we need to change that," says lead lawyer, Gordon Erspamer

Raft of complaints

An average of 18 war veterans kill themselves each day - five of them under Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) care - according to a December e-mail between top department officials that has been filed as part of the federal lawsuit.

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Bob Handy,
Veterans United for Truth

The Rand Corporation has recently released a study that shows some 300,000 US troops - about 20% of those deployed - are suffering from depression, or post traumatic stress disorder, after serving in Iraq or Afghanistan.

"We find that the VA has simply not devoted enough resources. They don't have enough psychiatrists," said Mr Erspamer.

In 2006 suicide rates were reported to be the highest in 26 years, at 99 confirmed suicides.

The two organisations involved in the legal action are asking US District Court Judge Samuel Conti, a World War II army veteran, to order the VA to overhaul its system drastically.

"What I would like to see from the VA is that they actually treat patients with respect," says Bob Handy, the head of Veterans United for Truth, one of the bodies suing the agency.

Mr Handy formed the group after hearing a raft of complaints from veterans about their treatment, when he was a member of the Veterans Caucus of the state Democratic Party.

More professionals

Government lawyers say the VA has been making mental health and suicide prevention a top priority.

In court filings, the VA states that for 2008, \$3.8b will be spent on mental health.

Also, more than 3,700 new mental health professionals have been hired in the past two-and-a-half years, bringing the total to just under 17,000.

The VA's lawyers have filed papers arguing that the courts have no jurisdiction to tell the VA how to operate, and no business wading into the everyday management of a network that includes 153 medical centres nationwide.

The case will be heard without a jury and is expected to last about two weeks.

Plaintiffs are hoping the judge will order broad changes in the administration of veterans' benefits, or perhaps even

appoint an outside administrator to oversee changes.

Are you a military veteran or do you know one? What do you think of the care and support provided for soldiers and veterans?

Name:

Email address:

Town and Country:

Phone number (optional):

Comments:

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