



WASHINGTON

State Independent Living Council

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Position on Veterans Returning from the Middle East

Washington State Independent Living Council
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It is the position of the Washington State Independent Living Council (SILC) that State and Federal governments must immediately initiate efforts to meet the needs of more than 30,000 disabled veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. The current gaps between the needs of and the resources available to disabled veterans are a national shame. Increasing Washington's capacity to provide Independent Living Services is a critical step in closing these gaps and meeting needs of returning veterans with disabilities and their families. (Approved April 25, 2008)

Background/Supporting Evidence

- Veterans with service related disabilities are returning from the Middle East and becoming an important segment of the approximately 1.2 million people with disabilities in Washington. However, veterans are returning to the US and to Washington State with limited awareness of the impact of their disabilities on their lives. Further, there has been a lack of concerted effort in the State and country to build capacity to respond to the critical needs of returning veterans and their families.
- Of the more than 30,000 service veterans that have been wounded in action in Iraq and Afghanistan since October 2001, (insert data on the current number of WA returning veterans with known acquired disabilities related to combat exposure)
- Traumatic brain injury (TBI) is regarded as the 'signature injury' of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. 65% of the veterans served at Walter Reed Hospital have a diagnosed traumatic brain injury.

- Veterans' needs and gaps in services will be considered in the development of the state Traumatic Brain Injury Council's Comprehensive Plan, due to the Washington Legislature in December 2008. Disability rights organizations, including the SILC, will provide information that will contribute to the development of a comprehensive plan. It is critical that the Legislature act to meet the needs of these veterans and their families.
- In addition to brain injury, increasing numbers of veterans are coping with other disability related issues including mental health problems, post-traumatic stress disorders, loss of limbs, hearing impairments including tinnitus, burns, vision impairments including blindness, and other disability related issues.
- A 2007 Veterans Administration study finds that recently discharged veterans are having a difficult time finding adequate civilian jobs. Veterans are more likely to earn lower than average wages for years partly because of employer concerns about their mental health and overall skills.
- A recent U.S. Department of Labor report indicates that formal job complaints by reservists remained high, citing concerns about denied jobs or benefits after they tried to return to their old jobs after extended tours in the Middle East.
- Employment concerns have prompted the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to issue two question-and-answer guides – one for employers and one for veterans – on workplace issues affecting veterans with service-connected disabilities.
- Washington's current network of seven Centers for Independent Living have a strong interest in but currently lack the capacity to serve the anticipated increase in demand for independent living services.

Conclusion

Returning veterans with newly acquired disabilities face significant challenges and will benefit from independent living services that include peer support and networking, awareness of their disability related rights and responsibilities, and access to support services. In Washington State, the legislative and executive branches of the government need to develop and fund comprehensive strategies to meet our responsibility to these returning veterans and their families. This includes allocating targeted resources for Washington's network of Centers for Independent Living to provide information and referral, advocacy, peer support and independent living skills training.

July 23, 2008