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Disabled Veteran Rails Against Decades-old Policy Limiting Healthcare Travel Reimbursement; VA Director Says Senate Can Help

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Joel Gifft, now disabled, fought in the Vietnam war with his brother and his best friend – both of whom are now deceased. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

“It’s a life and death matter for me,” Joel Gifft bellowed across the hall of the at the Fritz E. Lawaetz Legislative Building on St. Croix, as he advocated passionately for veterans who have had difficulties accessing healthcare services in a timely manner.

The Vietnam veteran struggled to hold back tears as he told the Senate Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs and Consumer Protection about the challenges he faces in trying to take care of his health.

He went before lawmakers on Monday to ask that a longstanding policy be discarded, and that access to healthcare outside of facilities locally and in Puerto Rico to be made available so that he and other veterans have a better chance at life.

“That 50-year-old policy, you have to go to the closest veteran hospital, that should be thrown out. We need the governor, we need Washington representative, Mr. Farrell [Director, Virgin Islands Veterans Affairs] and the veterans to go to Washington and have them change that policy,” he insisted.

According to Mr. Gifft, it takes anywhere from six months to a year after a doctor gives a referral for veterans to receive care at the San Juan VA Medical Center (VAMC) in Puerto Rico. “By the time they get to us our situation is worse,” he lamented.

Mr. Gifft defended the care he is able to receive in Puerto Rico. “Puerto Rico have a marvelous hospital. If you go there, top-notch. The problem that we have is to get there,” he said. However, he noted that while the federal government would not pay for him to travel to Miami, Florida where he could access the care he needed without a language barrier, equal travel costs to Puerto Rico would be funded. “They would pay my whole round-trip ticket to go to Puerto Rico but to go to Miami, they’re telling me no. It’s unfair. I fight for my country like anybody else,” he said.

Mr. Gifft, now disabled, fought in the Vietnam war with his brother and his best friend – both of whom are now deceased. “The majority of Vietnam veterans are dead. I don’t know when my turn gone come.”

“All I’m asking for is my reimbursement for my ticket going to the States,” he remarked. Mr. Gifft argued that a change in policy would allow many veterans to go to the mainland to get the care that they want and need. “I’m here to testify of the hurt and pain that I have to go through for my own health when you draft me and put me in the army and send me to Vietnam to fight a war, spray me with chemicals and it’s eating my body from inside out,” he asserted.

Patrick Farrell, director of the VI Office of Veterans Affairs and himself a two-time combat veteran, said the solution is largely for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to resolve but agreed that collaboration both locally and state-side is necessary. “The concerns have merit,” he admitted.

Frustrated with the line of questioning from senators, Mr. Farrell explained that his office is working hard to make things easier for veterans. “I put my life on the line just like everybody else that did and I too would love if I can be able to travel to North Dakota, California or wherever else to receive my medical services. I use the VA, the same VA in Puerto Rico, I use it. I make do with what we have.”

“If I was able to do it through my office, it would have been done to benefit not just me but all the veterans of the Virgin Islands,” Mr. Farrell insisted.

Currently, according to Mr. Farrell, Title 38 of the United States Code allows veterans to seek medical care at any VA facility. However, federal regulations only authorize the VA to pay for the travel of service-connected veterans to the closest VA medical facility for appointments. Veterans who wish to seek care at a VA facility further afield will not have their travel costs underwritten by the federal government. The territorial government, Mr. Farrell says, only appropriates a small sum to the Office of Veterans Affairs for medical travel for each veteran.

“The \$250 is based on budget,” he said. Having repeatedly been questioned on the issue through successive legislative hearings, Mr. Farrell explained that his office would need more money from the Legislature to be able to reimburse up to \$1,600 per veteran to travel to the mainland for care.

Over 200 veterans travel to Puerto Rico each year, fully funded by the local veteran’s office which gets approximately \$450,000 each year for medical travel and burial benefits. Despite efforts to split the money in half, the majority of the funds usually goes towards burial reimbursement, senators heard. For this fiscal year, the office has spent \$49,835 of their allocation.

Meanwhile, the Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs is waiting for the implementation of the newly enacted PACT Act which, among other things, expands VA health care and benefits for veterans who were exposed to burn pits, Agent Orange, and other toxic substances and environments during their time in the military.

The Act, passed in August 2022, allows veterans who were victims of toxic exposures in the Vietnam, Gulf War, and post-9/11 eras to claim benefits and financial compensation for the adverse health effects of that exposure.