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Internship Site: MS Achievement Center

Capstone Proposal

Introduction and Purpose Statement:

This study will examine how the services provided to disabled veterans by Department of Veterans Affairs have changed over time. I will begin with a brief history about the founding of the VA in 1930 and the services provided to the veterans with disabilities. The study will focus primarily on how the Vietnam War changed the types of services needed and will evaluate whether it led to improvements in the modern day. My main research question is: How well have the VA services kept up with the needs of modern veterans who often return with extreme cognitive disabilities such as PTSD? This study will explore the origins of the VA and the support systems which have been developed for the veterans with disabilities, and will search to bridge the gap to those veterans with disabilities who are not getting the support they need at this time.

Literature Review:

The start of acknowledging disability among veterans was during the 16th century, when a small amount of pensions were given out to veterans with disabilities. It was service to those who have served the country. After World War I, veterans fought for service which they needed desperately because it was the Great Depression era. The Congress intervened by passing the World War Adjustment Compensation Act (May 19, 1924), which provided a bonus to the veterans who served in the WWI. The payments tended to be delayed, which was an issue for many veterans who came back, unable to make a living ("VA History in Brief" 9).

The Veterans Administration (VA) was created by Congress in 1930 in order to have

agencies administer veterans benefits. The “VA History in Brief” stated that “The new agency was responsible for medical services for war veterans’ disability compensation and allowances for WWI veterans; life insurance; bonus certificates; retirement payments for emergency officers; Army and Navy pensions; and retirement payments for civilian employees” (12). From this moment in history, the VA was pushed to provide aid to those who have made a contribution to the country, which not only led to pensions, but services to the disabled veterans as well.

WWII was a war which had the most number of served, deaths, and wounded in the history of all of United States’ wars up to that time. According to the Congressional Research Service, there were approximately 16 million who served, 405,399 who died, and 671,846 who were wounded (Stone). The Disabled Veterans’ Rehabilitation Act of 1943 started a vocational rehabilitation program for the disabled veterans from WWII. Because of this act, the VA provided 621,000 disabled veterans with job training (“VA History in Brief” 13). This gave veterans opportunities and chances to adjust in the civilian world. The VA also formed a GI Bill which tremendously helped the veterans with getting higher education and home ownership possible. It transformed America’s economy and its society. As the “VA History in Brief” presents, “The GI Bill contributed more than any other program in history to the welfare of veterans and their families, and to the growth of the nation’s economy” (14). For example, Congress authorized the VA to provide the amputees from the WWII, fairly quickly, by assisting thousands of veterans and becoming the top developer of prosthetic devices in the world (14).

Compared to earlier wars, the Vietnam War had a larger percentage of disabled veterans. There was culture shock, which made adjusting back to civilian life difficult. Many veterans felt isolated and were separated from friends and family because they were retuning with severe

PTSD. The Vietnam Veterans of America was established in 1978 because “By the late 1970s, it was clear the established veterans groups had failed to make a priority of the issues of concern to Vietnam Veterans” (“A Short History of VVA”). The Veterans Health Care Act of 1979 also created separate facilities from the VA called Vet Centers (“VA History in Brief” 23). The VVA “strives for individual and group empowerment and locally originated action to assist veterans and other needy members of their communities,” and includes services that help veterans adjust to civilian life (“A Short History of VVA”). Recently on February 24, 2012, the VVA sent out a press release asking the VA to recognize that there were harmful chemicals in aircrafts that were used to release Agent Orange herbicide during the Vietnam War. The VVA specifically asked the VA to provide disability compensation to veterans who were exposed to the chemicals (www.vva.org/PressReleases//2012/pr12-006.html). If organizations like the VVA did not catch issues like this, then the VA would not recognize these needs and provide these services to veterans. Having organizations like this one that are founded by veterans and focus on veterans with disabilities makes sure that those individuals receive the support they truly deserve and do not fall the cracks of government services.

The contemporary wars, such as Iraq and Afghanistan produced many veterans with PTSD. According to Congressional Research Service, there were 1.5 million who served, and 25,455 members who were wounded (Stone). This presents many military personnel being negatively affected from the war. Robert Pietrzak, Jack Tsai, et al stated in their article, “A confirmatory factor analytic study” that “PTSD is one of the most prevalent and disabling psychiatric disorders in veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars”. They used a medical study of PTSD used by the DSM-IV model. Other studies suggest that modern veterans with PTSD often develop substance abuse disorders as well. For instance, The Journal of Dual Diagnosis

discussed “Co-occurring PTSD and Substance Use Disorders” which shows the symptoms of PTSD being highly correlated with hazardous drinking, and present the treatment of the two.

The VA is also trying to meet the demands of the increase veterans with PTSD. The Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee stated, “The VA still has work to do to decrease wait times, ... reduce the stigma around seeking care and to provide access to care in rural areas” (Zoroya). And Zoroya stated, “Since the Iraq and Afghanistan wars began, 211,819 combat veterans have been treated by the VA for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), about 16% of the 1.3 million who fought. But the VA says it sees only about half the veterans from the two wars, because hundreds of thousands seek care elsewhere or not at all”. Similar to the Vietnam veterans, some modern veterans are forming their own support services, such as websites like, “SaveOneSoldier.org”, which welcomes veterans with PTSD, and provides resources and articles that may help the veteran. There are several other websites like “SaveOneSoldier.org”, and these groups allow veterans to advocate for more compensation and benefits when the VA does not provide enough support or denies claims.

Methodology:

My research will be conducted by going to the library and by searching for articles on Google Scholar and EBSCOHost. I will also use documents from the Veterans Administration website and other websites for organizations that support veterans and veterans with disabilities, such as the website for Vietnam Veterans of America. I will also work with my faculty mentor, Professor Victoria Marks, to find more data and sources for my project. I also hope to do one interview with someone who works with veterans with disabilities. I met Salvador Ayala through ROTC. He works for Disabled American Veterans and agreed to talk with me about my research

project.

Disability Studies:

Disability Studies can be a great foundation to use to study veterans with disability, particularly PTSD. The disability that a veteran lives with comes with controversies, from being stigmatized to being under represented. Many military veterans who fought in wars often do not come back the same. They may come back disabled in many forms, particularly with PTSD. Veterans with PTSD are interconnected with disability studies in many ways. For instances when veterans are negatively affected by the war they fought, they struggle to fit back into the civilian world. It is a slow process of recognizing veterans with PTSD in society, but progress is being made little by little.

I hope this research project will help inform the public about what veterans with disabilities like PTSD go through when they return from war, and make services accessible, which will improve the overall community of disability and service sectors.