

Veteran Stigma: "What Does My Country think of Me?"



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As if to pour salt on the physical and psychological wounds of millions of America's veterans, a recent trend has emerged in both public pronouncements and privately held attitudes that suggests that veterans returning from the 'long wars' in Iraq and Afghanistan pose a security risk to potential employers, fellow workers, and workplace patrons.

"I cannot be open about my post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) with prospective employers in light of the Homeland Security debacle," says former Army Sgt. and Iraq veteran Steve Kraft. "It's like a scarlet letter."

The "debacle" Sgt. Kraft refers to means comments made by Janet Napolitano, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), citing a section of an April 7, 2009, DHS Report titled "Disgruntled Military Veterans" to the effect that "DHS assesses that right-wing extremists will attempt to recruit and radicalize returning veterans...suffering from the psychological effects of war."

"Having been singled out by the media for attention, Napolitano's statement surely discourages would-be employers from considering hiring veterans applying for jobs, especially in an uncertain economy."

But while the DHS incident lingers in the minds of the public, it isn't the only highly publicized case of veterans stigmatized for their courageous and honorable military service.

A scandal at Penn State erupted in February when the University's Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) department posted a contentious video on its website. Produced as part of a package to help faculty deal with "worrisome student behaviors," the video depicted an angry young veteran and a professor who felt threatened by him. Unhappy with his grade, the veteran threatens the professor and says he deserves a better grade, "or else."

Former Petty Officer 3rd Class Maggie Kwok, a 25-year-old Chinese-American sophomore and the President of Penn State's Veterans Organization was shocked by the University video.

"I can't believe they made this video about us," recalled the former Navy Corpsman of the incident when it happened.

"Veterans on campus were very upset," said the veteran of Guantanamo and Iraq.

The university responded to the veterans' concerns by removing the video.

And yet, the stigma that veterans face has, as Sgt. Kraft feels, turned into widespread employment discrimination, precisely at a time when getting a job is especially difficult.

Major Matt Tully, a New York Army National Guardsman and an attorney in his civilian life, specializes in fighting the employment discrimination faced by many veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns.

"It's a growing problem," said Major Tully, "higher now than at any other time in the past."

According to a 2007 GAO Report, only 1 in 10 veterans files a Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) complaint.

"It used to be that employers didn't know that it was illegal to discriminate against veterans who served in the Reserve or National Guard," said Major Tully. "Now, employers intentionally disregard USERRA."

Due to the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, employers have taken steps to lay off those Reservists who are called up to Active Duty.

"For example, an airline pilot who deploys to Iraq for a year..." said Major Tully, "...has to be retrained upon his return, which costs a lot of money and overtime."

In recent years, the Departments of Labor (DOL) and Justice (DOJ) have taken a much harder stance against the discrimination facing military reservists now that violations are becoming more flagrant.

The growing problem is also being discussed and debated in Congress.

In January 2009, Rep. Lloyd Doggett [D-TX], sponsored H.R. 466, the "Wounded Veteran Job Security Act." If passed, the bill would prohibit "...any employment discrimination or acts of reprisal against any person who has, or who has been treated for, an injury, illness, or disability determined by the Secretary of Veterans' Affairs to have been incurred in, or aggravated by, military service."

According to testimony by Congressman Doggett, "...the amount of time required for the treatment of a veteran's service-connected disability exceeds the amount of vacation and sick leave allotted to the veteran. Some employers have viewed this as grounds to terminate veterans, leaving them faced with an impossible choice - whether to continue receiving the treatment that they need or to keep the job that supports them."

But many veterans aren't even able to get a foot in the doorways of potential employers.

Rick Jackson, the Program Coordinator for New York State's "Troops to Teachers Program," is worried that his office will soon shut down.

"School principals have PTSD in the back of their minds after DHS put out their 'terrorist watch' for veterans," said Jackson.

"Many principals seem to have the attitude that 'All these guys [veterans] do is yell and scream and I'm not going to have that in my hallway."

In a labor market that is contracting rather than expanding, seeing the hiring of returning veterans as unnecessarily risky puts those military personnel behind the 8-ball in terms of landing jobs.

For many veterans, dealing with the stigma attached to their wounds isn't something easy to do.

Retired Army Capt. Mark Brogan was severely wounded in 2006 when an improvised explosive device (IED) blasted his HMMWV ("Humvee") while on patrol in Iraq.

"I'm leery of putting down PTSD or TBI on an application for work or school," said Capt. Brogan. "I am concerned with back-door discrimination."

While former Army Sgt. Steve Kraft applies for federal jobs in New York City, he participates in group therapy for PTSD twice a week.

"It potentially can affect me a great deal if I get a job offer" said Kraft of the growing discrimination against America's veterans.

"The way veterans are being mistreated makes me wonder, 'What does my country think of me?'"