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Veterans get free legal help

BY BO PETERSEN (CONTACT)
The Post and Courier
Sunday, March 29, 2009



Tyrone Walker
The Post and Courier

Korean War veteran Henry Young of Charleston visits a mobile mission to bring free legal aid to military veterans Saturday in North Charleston. Veterans received assistance from a lawyer and three law students from the University of Detroit Mercy Law School.

Napalm, mustard gas, DDT, nuclear radiation — Henry Young said he saw it all up close and personal a half-century ago. Ever since, he's been fighting for veteran's health benefits.

First it was the hearing loss and joint pain. Now it's prostate cancer. He said he worked long, cold days and nights at an Air Force "bomb drop" in Korea. He helped make napalm; he worked hands on with nukes. He served two tours of duty, 1952-62, back in the day when his service record indicated "Negroid," he said. The second tour was with the emerging nuclear program. The note on his record says "TOP SECRET."

Young said he can't find his medical reports, if they were ever filed. The nuclear program went civilian; other files were burned in a fire in the 1970s, he was told. His claims have been turned down repeatedly at the regional veterans office with the denials stipulating that he couldn't produce records. His appeal to Washington is six years in the waiting.

Young, 73, of Charleston, sweeps his hand to the dozens of veterans sitting hunched and apprehensive around him in the Armory Park Community Center in North Charleston.

"Everyone you see here has been denied in the regional office. My claim has been sitting as long as some of these guys have been born," he said. "You can't find anybody who was in service with me. They're either dead, or in jail, or something."

More than 1,500 discouraged veterans turned out this weekend to get a turn in the "Project SALUTE" Winnebago. The van is on a second annual tour from the University of Detroit Mercy Law School, doing pro bono legal work to help with veteran claims. With the van came an attorney and three law students, each of whom is a veteran. Waiting for them in North Charleston were a half-dozen area attorney volunteers.

The veterans are different — different services, eras, wars and medical problems. Their story is the same.

"You hear it all the time, about the issues fighting the VA (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs)," said Tiffany Spann-Wilder, the North Charleston attorney who asked the van to make a stop here. She's also a veteran and has grown discouraged not to be able to help the people who edge in her office with their shoulders slumped.

"Some of the people here have a lot of problems, especially the ones who have been in combat. When you're over there three, four years and people are dying around you, that has an effect. They're not getting returned what they put in (to the country). And that's disheartening," she said.

"It's a huge part of the population that goes unhelped and unnoticed," said Kayin Darby, an Orangeburg legal-aid attorney and veteran who brought others from his office to help.

Young is quiet spoken but insistent. His American Legion cap proudly reads "Korean War veteran," and he carries the war's blue ribbon service medal. Except for the cap, he might well have disappeared in the services' eyes. He came to see if anything could be done to move along his appeal. Like a lot of the other veterans, he carried a sheaf of papers with him. "Let these guys take a look," he said. "They're trained lawyers and I'm not."

Ohlen Baird was driving the van when it pulled into Jacksonville, Fla., last year and found 250 people already waiting in an early morning line. He shakes his head to think of it. "Knowing there are people out there who got shot at, risked their lives, and can't get their benefits straightened out," he said. "There should never be a delay."

Reach **Bo Petersen** at 937-5744 or bpetersen@postandcourier.com.

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