

Guiding Principles

Throughout their deliberations, the Commissioners carefully considered the philosophical and moral questions of how a grateful Nation shows appreciation for and takes care of its disabled veterans and their families. Indeed, the Commission believes that it is a moral obligation of the Nation to give its veterans appreciation and care in the most effective manner possible.

In developing its guiding principles, the Commission looked to the past—particularly the work of previous commissions, task forces, and study groups—to identify common themes and ideals. The work of the Bradley Commission of 1956 was particularly compelling. Formally called the Commission on Veterans' Pensions, the group created nine guidelines for veterans' benefits and hoped its work, with continued research, would “lead to a more equitable and rational system of veterans' benefits—one adjusted to the real needs of veterans on the one hand, and to the requirements of a healthy overall economy on the other

hand.”¹ This Commission agrees with the Bradley Commission’s vision and seeks to advance similar goals.

The following principles should underpin the policies and practices of veterans’ disability benefits now and in the future. The Commission believes these are the principles that should guide Congress, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the Department of Defense as they face the difficult challenges of effectively shaping and evolving the benefits system for the nation’s present and future disabled veterans.

Principle 1

Benefits should recognize the often enormous sacrifices of military service as a continuing cost of war, and commend military service as the highest obligation of citizenship.

This principle recognizes and honors the American tradition of military service as a citizen’s duty. Americans know that freedom is not free. This country has paid each war’s veterans and survivors their due benefits for as long as 150 years after the armed conflict. Such expenditures must be included in calculations of the cost of war to ensure the availability of sufficient funds to care for future generations of disabled veterans.

Preserving the dignity and integrity of military service is a paramount obligation of the Federal Government. If veterans’ benefits are insufficient to care for those who have “borne the battle,” this may diminish America’s ability to recruit and retain Armed Forces personnel, potentially compromising national security.

¹ President’s Commission on Veterans’ Pensions (“Bradley Commission”), *Findings and Recommendations: Veterans Benefits in the United States*, Washington, DC: House Committee on Veterans Affairs, 1956, 32.

Principle 2

The goal of disability benefits should be rehabilitation and reintegration into civilian life to the maximum extent possible while preserving the veterans' dignity.

The government must help wounded warriors reestablish themselves physically, psychologically, and professionally in civilian society. To that end, disabled veterans should have access to state-of-the-art rehabilitative care, to social services, and to funds that help veterans accommodate to living with disabilities. Disability benefits should assist veterans in the most effective manner to attain their maximum level of functioning. Disability benefits must achieve this goal to give disabled veterans the opportunity for "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Principle 3

Benefits should be uniformly based on severity of service-connected disability without regard to the circumstances of the disability (wartime v. peacetime, combat v. training, or geographical location).

Military service is a 24-hour responsibility from induction to discharge. A disabling injury or illness sustained at any time or place during military service is a sacrifice to the Nation and a source of suffering to the affected individual and his or her family. Thus, all disability-causing illnesses and injuries that occur during a period of military service that is other than dishonorable must be compensated. The level of compensation should be commensurate with the severity of the disability.

Principle 4

Benefits and services should be provided that collectively compensate for the consequences of service-connected disability on the average impairment of earning capacity, the ability to engage in usual life activities, and quality of life.

The current statutory basis for veterans' disability payments is the average impairment of earning capacity, yet service-connected disabilities can impede veterans from engaging in usual life activities and can impair their quality of life. A fair package of disability benefits and services must provide care for and compensate for veterans' impairments, impediments to usual daily functioning, and loss of quality of life. The compensation levels for disabled veterans should be assessed in comparison with the earnings of nondisabled veterans on a periodic basis. An appropriate objective for disability benefits is, to the extent possible, to make the disabled veteran whole relative to nondisabled veterans.

Principle 5

Benefits and standards for determining benefits should be updated or adapted frequently based on changes in the economic and social impact of disability and impairment, advances in medical knowledge and technology, and the evolving nature of warfare and military service.

Changes in American society and commerce, such as the ubiquitous use of computers over long-distance networks, can change the degree to which certain physical and psychological impairments affect individuals' ability to function. These social and commercial changes should be evaluated regularly in the context of veterans' benefits.

Breakthroughs in medicine, psychology and psychiatry, rehabilitative science, prosthetics, adaptive equipment, and electronics can help disabled veterans attain greater functionality and a higher quality of life. To those ends, disabled veterans should receive access to state-of-the-art health care, rehabilitative services, and adaptive devices.

Research should be conducted to address the unmet needs of disabled veterans and their families. Such research should focus in particular on the conditions of vulnerable and underserved populations, such as those with severe mental illness and traumatic brain injury. Validated research findings must be translated into regulation and policy updates and best practices transmitted to the field.

Principle 6

Benefits should include access to a full range of health care provided at no cost to service-disabled veterans. Priority for care must be based on service connection and degree of disability.

At a minimum, every disabled veteran should receive the health care necessary to assist him or her in living as near normal a life as is possible.

Principle 7

Funding and resources to adequately meet the needs of service-disabled veterans and their families must be fully provided while being aware of the burden on current and future generations.

As noted under Principle 1, the costs of war must be calculated to include benefits for disabled veterans, their dependents, and their survivors well into the future. To maintain the appropriateness of the benefit and the appropriateness of

the level of the benefit, required resources and costs must be systematically projected, responsibly reflected in policy decisions, and provided for in appropriations.

Principle 8

Benefits to our Nation's service-disabled veterans must be delivered in a consistent, fair, equitable, and timely manner.

Benefits should be delivered without stigma, bias, or prejudice against the veteran or their service. Service to country cannot be measured solely by the time spent in the military, but rather should also include the severity of the injuries sustained during that service. Veterans and their families should be able to access benefits in a nonadversarial, customer-driven culture that meets their current needs. Benefits delayed are benefits denied and therefore must meet timely standards for delivery so as not to disenfranchise the veteran. If a veteran is somehow ill served, "lost" in the system, or ignored, it can take years and many additional resources to rectify the situation; this must be avoided at all costs. Therefore, this principle is essential to ensure that veterans are appropriately served.

The Veterans' Disability Benefits Commission leaves these eight guiding principles as a cornerstone for future generations so they may sustain a system that will adapt to the needs of future veterans.