

Wounded Warriors

What to Do if a Family Member is Injured in the Line of Duty

by Jennifer G. Williams

It's a terrifying thing when you receive word that a loved one deployed overseas has been injured, but understanding the process ahead and your rights and benefits will save a lot of frustration in an otherwise frantic time.

Ordinarily, it works like this: the injured service member is transported from a Combat Support Hospital in Iraq or Afghanistan to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany. From Landstuhl, the service member is then brought to any of several stateside medical centers for initial treatment—usually to the National Naval Medical Center (NNMC) at Bethesda or Walter Reed Army Medical Center, but sometimes to other centers for specialty care (Brooke Army Medical Center in Texas for burn injuries, for example).

Family members understandably want to visit their loved ones while they are in the hospital, and in recent years, the military and other organizations have made it easier and more affordable to do so. The first step may be to contact the medical center where the service member is being treated. Oftentimes, their family services center at the hospital can direct you to places to stay and ways to get there. The Department of Defense will offer transportation for up to two family members when a service member is classified as Very Seriously Ill/Injured (VSI) or Seriously Ill/Injured (SI), as determined by the attending physician and hospital commander upon injury. These Invitational Travel Orders (ITOs) will be offered to immediate family members or those acting *in loco parentis*. Currently, those who have been offered transportation and whose loved one was injured or became ill in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF),

Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Noble Eagle are also authorized a travel allowance (per diem).

The Fisher House Program (www.fisherhouse.org), offered at Walter Reed and every other major military medical center, donates “comfort homes” for families to stay in at little cost during a service member's hospitalization. The USO-Metro (in the Military District of Washington, which serves both Walter Reed and the NNMC) offers an Emergency Housing Program, in which it supplies free furnished apartment units to families of service members who are critically or terminally ill and who require treatment at area military hospitals. These units are available for up to 60 days at no cost. Visit www.usometrod.org/programspage.htm for more information.

And Operation Hero Miles (www.heromiles.org) is a relatively new organization that converts donated frequent flier miles into airline tickets for family members to fly to be with injured loved ones.

Another way to get the most from your benefits is to contact the support program for your military branch. The U.S. Army Wounded Warrior Program (formerly the Disabled Soldier Support System), www.aw2.army.mil; Marine for Life — Injured Support Program, www.m4.usmc.mil;

Access SAFE HARBOR — Navy Severely Injured Support, www.npc.navy.mil/safeharbor; and Access Air Force Palace HART (Helping Airmen Recover Together), which is available through your local Air Force Base, all offer support and guidance to service members and their families. They also offer a wealth of information—from information about ITOs to options for Continuation on Active Duty, and from

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What You Can Do:

- Contact your local Family Support Center or installation legal office for any assistance or information you may need
- Track down your loved one's personal belongings—especially his or her wallet. Contact the service member's commander at the time of the injury for information about where the belongings are and how to obtain them.
- Contact relevant support groups, to include the Army's Wounded Warrior Program, www.aw2.army.mil; Marine for Life — Injured Support, www.m4.usmc.mil; Access SAFE HARBOR — Navy Severely Injured Support, www.npc.navy.mil/safeharbor; and Access Air Force Palace HART (Helping Airmen Recover Together), available through your local Air Force Base.
- Visit Military OneSource at www.militaryonesource.com. This 24/7 service is provided by the Department of Defense at no charge to all active duty, Guard, and Reserve members and their families. If you are a severely injured service member, or the family member of a severely injured service member, Military OneSource can help you understand what benefits are available to you; identify resources; and obtain counseling, information, and support.
- Be there for your loved one, who is just as scared and uncertain as you. Seek outside help, if needed, to deal with the emotional and/or physical stress involved.

Injured Support Process

- Injury
 - Notify/Medivac
 - Overseas Regional Medical Center
 - Family Travel
 - Initial Stateside Medical Treatment
 - Convalescent Leave
 - Follow-on Treatment and Rehabilitation
 - Evaluation Process
 - VA Transition
 - Veteran Status
 - Post-Separation Care
- from the Marine For Life Program



navigating the Medical and the Physical evaluation board processes, to federal government or private-sector employment opportunities upon separation from the military.

Once the initial treatment at a major military medical center is complete, the service member may move to a military or other medical facility near his or her home for any needed continuing treatment or services, including physical therapy, occupational therapy, and mental health counseling. These services may be provided on an in-patient basis or while a service member is living at home.

The service member is entitled to convalescent leave, a non-chargeable absence from duty granted to sick and wounded service members who have been admitted to a hospital and are not yet fit for return to duty. Convalescent leave is normally limited to a period of no more than 30 days per period of hospitalization, but it can be extended in certain cases.

Decisions as to whether and when a service member may return to active duty are made through a process that starts with the service member's referral to a Medical Evaluation Board (MEB). The MEB decides whether a medical condition interferes with the service member's ability to carry out the duties of his rank. If the MEB decides that there is a significant interference with the service member's ability to carry out his or her duties, the case is referred to the informal Physical Evaluation Board (PEB), which can recommend discharge with severance pay or retirement, and assigns a disability percentage based on the extent of the service member's disability.

There are many services available to discharged service members, including benefits counseling, help and support with job training, and continued rehabilitation and treatment through the Department of Veterans Affairs. For more information, visit www.va.gov, or their special website for service members returning from Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom at www.seamlesstransition.va.gov, where you can find links to necessary forms and answers to any questions concerning transitioning from active duty to a veteran status. Other organizations, including the Disabled Veterans of America www.dav.org and American Veterans, www.amvets.org.

Editor's Note: A firestorm erupted this year amid allegations of shortfalls in the care of outpatients at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Hospital Commander Maj. Gen. George W. Weightman was relieved of duty March 1, Army Secretary Francis J. Harvey resigned the next day, and the service's surgeon general submitted his retirement request over the issue. The Army quickly named Maj. Gen. Eric B. Schoomaker as the commanding general of the North Atlantic Regional Medical Command and Walter Reed, and officials have already implemented an independent review group to assess outpatient treatment at both Walter Reed and the NNMC and to make recommendations for improvements.

Some officials have pointed out that Walter Reed and other military medical facilities are given only a finite amount of money from Congress to both care for patients and upkeep their facilities. At press time, Congress convened hearings to address the care at Walter Reed and other military facilities.