

Our Veterans Aren't Receiving the Tools They Need

By John M. Williams

In the last 30 months, more than 100 calls or e-mails have come to Assistive Technology News from individuals looking for information on assistive technology products that accommodate the needs of returning veterans with disabilities from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The inquiries sought information to benefit soldiers with one of the following: traumatic brain injuries, limb loss, or the loss of vision, speech, hearing, or mobility. (Even doctors called.) The inquirers were either veterans with disabilities, family members or friends. The people seeking the information were angry, frustrated and desperate. Their quests were identical: help me because the VA can't or won't.

More than a dozen callers identified themselves as officers. Often the calls lasted an hour or longer. The inquirers asked not to be identified for fear of reprisal.

There was the veteran who lost his hand and says he was told, "You have to learn to use your other hand because except for a replacement prosthetic there isn't a technology that we know that can help you learn to use a keyboard."

There was a veteran and his wife who complained that he wasn't being fully rehabilitated and his VA hospital could not tell him much about the technology that would help his declining vision. "I want to be a bread winner again," he told me while crying.

There is the Good Samaritan who is trying to get the VA in upper New York to provide computer training to veterans with disabilities. "These veterans are just sitting in their rooms hour-after-hour, day-after-day, week-after-week without any training and hope," I was told.

There was the father of a soldier, who was losing his hearing, who asked, "What telecommunications products can help my son?"

I can cite scores more stories similar to the situations mentioned above.

I provided the callers or writers the best information I could. Often, I referred them to companies manufacturing products I believed could help them. I never recommended one specific product.

Whether its 100, 50 or 1 call or e-mail, the Veterans Administration, the Bush Administration and Congress have let our veterans down. These men and women proudly, loyally and bravely put their lives on the line because their commander-in-chief asked them. They have paid a personal price for their responses. They deserve to have access to the best technology and rehabilitation training. There are no plausible reasons for VA personnel lacking knowledge about assistive technology products. There are no plausible reasons for the Bush Administration allowing these situations to continue. To correct this problem, it should be mandatory for the VA hospitals to utilize the Department of Defense's Computer/Electronic Accommodations Program (<http://www.cap.gov>) and to work with the Assistive Technology Industry Association

(<http://www.atia.org>). VA personnel should also attend the California State University at North Ridge's Annual Assistive Technology next month (<http://www.csun.edu/cod/conf/index.htm>).

And Congress should make sure the VA and the Bush administration ensure our veterans have the rehabilitation tools they need.