

August 19, 2009

Shinseki discusses homelessness at Oregon conference

By RYAN KOST

Associated Press Writer

U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki says access to veterans' benefits, a backlog of claims and homelessness remain problems for veterans nationally but the government is making progress.

Shinseki, along with Gov. Ted Kulongoski and Sen. Ron Wyden, spent Wednesday morning in the Portland area addressing veterans' issues.

The first stop was the 64th annual convention of the Blinded Veterans Association, where Shinseki thanked members for their community support.

"You once served America, and you are serving her again," he said.

The retired general outlined the top problems, saying numbers speak for themselves.

More than half of the veteran population, or about 15 million people, have not sought access to health care and other benefits. Shinseki said the reasons are not clear, "but I'm going to work on that."

Veterans who are in the system face a backlog in claims, he added.

Shinseki spent most of his time, however, focusing on homelessness among veterans. He said it's important to catch warning signs, such as depression and poor health, before they drive someone to the streets.

He also touched on the newest GI Bill, which went into effect earlier this month to cover the cost of education at public universities and colleges as well as many private schools.

Wyden and Kulongoski echoed many of Shinseki's comments. Wyden said the government needed to "find new ways to reduce red tape for our veterans," while Kulongoski said a state veterans task force identified the same three issues Shinseki had pointed out.

"All of Oregon is proud of you and honored to have you here," said Kulongoski, a former Marine. "We welcome you, we honor you, and we wish you the very best."

At a round-table discussion about veterans' issues at Portland State University later in the morning, they were joined by several veterans, including some who are enrolled in universities and community colleges across the state.

The veterans said they were able to find their way through the bureaucratic maze. But they remained critical of services offered to veterans who have just returned.

Jonathan Sanford, Portland State University student body president, joined veterans who said the bulk of the counseling offered after service usually sounds more like a pitch to stay in the military.

The veterans said repeatedly that many just aren't aware of the services that are available to help them.

"At 26 years, I'm still waiting," said Casey Curry. "I'm a 26-year veteran. I'm a disabled veteran. I just want to go to school."

Curry is now attending **Clackamas Community College**, but he says it took too long to make that happen.

Michael Eschete, a former Marine and recent Portland State graduate, said he wasn't able to get access to education through veterans' programs until a friend helped him with the process.

"I didn't know about the program," Eschete said. "You don't know which questions to ask."

Shinseki offered reassurance for improvement. "The tone and culture in the VA is changing," he said.

2009 Associated Press. Permission granted for up to 5 copies. All rights reserved.

You may forward this article or get additional permissions by typing

http://license.icopyright.net/3.5721?icx_id=D9A69R1G0 into any web browser. Press Association and Associated Press logos are registered trademarks of Press Association . The iCopyright logo is a registered trademark of iCopyright, Inc