

## VA to reimburse vets who paid for nursing home care

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The Department of Veterans Affairs, stung by criticism that its slow action has forced some severely disabled veterans to spend themselves into poverty, has moved to implement a two-year-old law requiring it to reimburse such veterans for the cost of care at state-run nursing homes.

The VA sent letters to the nation's 137 state veterans nursing homes - including ones in Stony Brook and St. Albans, Queens - saying they expect to begin processing reimbursements within 90 days.

A bill signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2006 required the VA to reimburse the full cost for veterans with a 70 percent or greater service-connected disability who require nursing home care.

But although Congress specified that the law be implemented by March 21, 2007, the VA still has not begun issuing payments. A VA spokesman said no one was available to explain the two-year delay.

The holdup has forced some elderly veterans to spend away their life savings before they could qualify for Medicaid payments to cover the \$250-per-day cost of care at the Long Island State Veterans Home at Stony Brook University.

At least eight patients at Long Island State Veterans Home who would have been covered under the law have been forced to pay for some or all of their care out of pocket, according to Sen. Charles Schumer, who visited the nursing home last month. Two of the veterans have died while waiting for the law to come into effect.

About 80 percent of patients at the nursing home are on Medicaid, a hospital official said.

Some 4,800 Long Island veterans are more than 70 percent disabled and become increasingly likely to require nursing home care as they get into their 80s and 90s.

Long Island State Veterans Home director Fred Sganga said he was encouraged, but remains cautious. "We've been promised this won't take more than 90 days," he said. "But it's not over until it's over."

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