



Veterans caught in dispute over medicines

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Military veterans living in the state-run Alaska Pioneer Homes are losing out on free or low-cost prescription benefits they are entitled to for serving their country because two medical bureaucracies can't seem to figure out how to get VA drugs to them.

The problem -- mostly about the packaging the medicines come in -- affects those veterans who need help from staff to take their meds.

Instead of pill bottles, the Pioneer Homes want the medicine to come in blister packs -- foil on one side, plastic on the other, name of pill and patient on the package, with each pill ready to be individually popped out.

That's for safety, says Dave Cote, head of the Pioneer Homes.

But the Veterans Administration isn't set up to make blister packs, says Marcia Hoffman-Devoe, spokeswoman for the agency. "We don't have the space to do that. We do not have the capability to do that."

Bea Combs's stepfather, a Navy man from 1943 to 1945, was affected when the Anchorage Pioneers' Home quit accepting medicine from the VA last spring. So she's trying to get the problem taken care of for all veterans.

"I was very upset when they notified me I had to get drugs from the Pioneer Home pharmacy," she said. That change came with a bill for \$120, on top of the \$6,178 monthly her family is already paying for care of Melvin Ertwine, who is 86.

Ertwine was a yeoman 3rd class. He went on to become an engineer for the Alaska Railroad. He drove trains, including the engine that sits on the Delaney Park Strip downtown, Combs said.

Between the VA and Ertwine's Blue Cross retirement insurance, Combs didn't have to pay anything for her stepdad's medications until all the Pioneer Homes stopped accepting VA drugs in mid-April, she said.

A PACKAGING DIFFERENCE

Veterans can get prescriptions for free if they are considered more than 50 percent disabled from their service, and the most any honorably discharged veteran has to pay is \$8 for a month's prescription.

Many veterans in Pioneer Homes were not taking advantage of VA benefits but instead used private insurance or the Medicare Part D prescription benefit, Cote said. A dozen of the 36 veterans in the Anchorage Pioneers' Home were getting their medicines from the VA, he said. A couple veterans in Palmer may also have been getting VA medicines, but that's about the extent

of the number of people affected, he said.

The state has Pioneer Homes, which are assisted-living facilities, in Anchorage, Palmer, Fairbanks, Juneau, Ketchikan, Palmer and Sitka. There are 114 veterans in Pioneer Home beds statewide, Cote said.

Until last spring, the Pioneer Homes received medicine packaged by the VA pharmacy in bottles. Pioneer Homes nurses would transfer the pills to pill boxes for each resident who needs assistance with medications. All the pills for a particular resident on a particular day and time would be mingled together in the pill boxes, which are similar to the pill boxes, or medi-sets, people might have at home.

Pioneer Homes nurses complained that wasn't safe enough, said Cote.

Once a medicine is in the pill box, it's not easy to identify which pill is what, Cote said. And besides, medication in medi-sets is supposed to be administered only by nurses, not nurse assistants, under state regulation, Cote says. The Pioneer Homes want to be able to use nurse assistants, which is OK if the drugs are in blister packs, he said.

In blister packs, "it's easy to tell if you're supposed to take a medicine on the 27 th of October at noon. If it's not punched out and gone, you can assume it's not administered," he said.

SEEKING A REFEREE

Bea Combs at first went to Cote trying to get her stepdad's VA drugs reinstated, then called Anchorage state Rep. Les Gara's office. Gara, Rep. Nancy Dahlstrom of Eagle River and Sen. Bill Wielechowski of Anchorage began sending letters and meeting with the Pioneer Homes officials.

One possible solution the legislators and Pioneer Homes came up with last week, said Cote, is for the state to contract with a provider to prescribe the medicines the dozen or so veterans who used VA prescriptions in Anchorage need; the state, in consideration of these veterans being unable to use their VA benefits, would then pick up the cost of the medicines. Cote is going to investigate this idea.

Combs doesn't see why it's such a difficult problem to solve.

The pills go from one pharmacy, unopened, to another pharmacy, she said. "To me, the liability doesn't make sense," she said. "Is there something else going on that I don't know?"

The two bureaucracies -- the VA and the Pioneer Homes -- both say they want to resolve the issue somehow.

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