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U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell intended to speak to a group of local veterans Monday to discuss three veteran-related issues: homelessness, suicide and outpatient wait times at U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs facilities.

The veterans steered the discussion another direction. They said many of the issues confronted by Iraq and Afghanistan veterans on the home front could be addressed by improving the method in which they're introduced to VA services.

They told Mitchell that veterans typically are allowed two years from the time they are discharged from active military service to enroll for certain VA services.

However, they said, many combat veterans need to make a clean break from the military simply to readjust to civilian life. That period of adjustment sometimes is longer than two years.

The veterans need time to reacquaint themselves with friends and relatives, and to reassess how their personal relationships may have changed. They also need to seek civilian employment.

"When I first got back from OIF, I didn't want to step anywhere close to the military," said one veteran, using the acronym for Operation Iraqi Freedom, the military's code name for the war. "I just wanted to decompress."

Also, many discharged in their teens or early 20s lack the life skills necessary to navigate the VA bureaucracy, they said. By the time some veterans are prepared to seek assistance for medical conditions or educational services, the window for enrolling has closed.

Many in the mix of 30 veterans and VA officials at the roundtable meeting told Mitchell that a five-year period, or even an open-ended period, for veterans to make contact with the VA would be appropriate.

"This was pretty interesting," Mitchell said after the hour-long affair at the Carl T. Hayden VA Medical Center in Phoenix. "Maybe we ought to do away with these windows. I mean, with the decompression. What leads to homelessness and suicide and so on is that we don't stick with them long enough ... I think there's really something to this idea. Why have a window?"

Don Moore, the executive director of the center and one of about 15 VA officials in attendance, told Mitchell that many veterans never seek VA services.

"It's a big challenge to reach all these folks. Sometimes we feel like it's an iceberg and we're just

seeing the tip of the iceberg," Moore said.

The veterans also recounted difficulties they've encountered with post-traumatic stress disorder, which is an emotional illness that can be caused by being thrust into life-threatening experiences, such as combat. Sufferers often are sensitive to normal experiences that trigger memories of their traumatic experiences.

"You might think you're over it, but something is going to happen, and it's going to come back," said Brent Phillips, 25, a Queen Creek resident and former Marine corporal who served in Iraq.

Two veterans at the meeting said car accidents triggered symptoms years after they had been discharged.

There's also widespread misunderstanding of the condition, Phillips said.

"The general public seems to think that if you have post-traumatic stress, you're nuts and you're diving under the coffee table. That's just not true," he said.

Veterans and VA officials alike told Mitchell that vets frequently are reluctant to seek treatment for post-traumatic stress for a variety of reasons. Among them: They don't appreciate the seriousness of the condition, their military training doesn't encourage them to get in touch with their feelings, they believe others are more deserving, they have transportation issues or they're concerned about how admitting to a mental disorder could affect future employment prospects.

Mitchell said the veterans' insight was valuable preparation for him heading into two House Veterans' Affairs Committee hearings scheduled for Wednesday in Washington, D.C. Those hearings will focus on veteran homelessness and suicide.