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300 Westage Business Center Drive • Fishkill, NY 12524  
399 Knollwood Road • White Plains, NY 10603  
655 Third Avenue • New York, NY 10017  
[www.littmankrooks.com](http://www.littmankrooks.com)

## Estate Planning & the Law

### Littman Krooks help vets get their benefits

BY THERESA KEEGAN

Sometimes the battle America's veterans face doesn't end when they leave a war area, but rather when they leave the military.

"The Veteran's Administration may not necessarily be on your side," said Bernard A. Krooks, a founding partner of Littman Krooks LLP and an attorney accredited by this federal organization designed to handle the needs of returning servicemen and women. "There's a lot of vets and not enough help, administratively, to get things done."

The factors may be a case of sheer numbers. There are more veterans returning home as the country's engaged in multiple wars throughout the world, and at the same time there are cutbacks in administrative budgets, and the result is many veterans are left waiting months, and sometimes even years, for services.

"We used to see a couple (of clients dealing with veteran benefits) a year," said Krooks. "Now we're seeing a few a month."

The law firm, with offices in Fishkill, White Plains and Manhattan deals with everything from securing accurate benefits to qualifying veterans for disability.

Krooks says some cases involve fighting for benefits for young veterans in their 20s and 30s who are placed in nursing homes for the elderly rather than being offered adequate nursing care so they can stay at home and heal. Others require assistance being diagnosed with and then

receiving the appropriate benefits for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and other mental afflictions. Often parents, caregivers or the veterans themselves turn to the attorneys after an exasperating attempt at getting what is rightfully due.

"It's challenging to navigate the maze of the VA," says Krooks. "Claims get denied summarily and benefits are just not getting allocated." Most often, people try initially to file on their own.

"These are good-natured people who've been to war. They certainly think they can file a form," says Krooks. "But dealing with the VA is like pulling teeth."

And trying to discover what benefits are even available is a challenge.

They can range from direct medical care, to caregiver and spouse benefits and even pensions. The fact it takes a legal challenge to secure what is rightfully due to the veterans is frustrating, but is comparable to other work Krooks does securing assistance for clients with special needs.

"It's rewarding and there's a tremendous need out there," he says, citing that there are a half-million veteran claims waiting to be processed.

Just scheduling a medical appointment to discover what disability a veteran has can take months and it can take up to a year for an appeal just to be certified, a mostly ministerial act.

While some people are reluctant to pursue legal action against the government,

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### Littman Krooks

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they've served, Krooks believes if the system isn't working for a person then it's time to seek outside help. His fees vary, depending upon the circumstances of each case, sometimes based on the medical condition, sometimes on the settlement.

"You shouldn't need a lawyer to get what you're entitled to," says Krooks. "But sometimes it's the only way to proceed. If we're asking these people to risk their lives to defend our way of life, they deserve to be treated with dignity, respect and to experience the highest quality of

life they can."

And in many cases even legal action does not offer an immediate panacea to a cumbersome process. "It can take months to get a claim addressed, even with a skilled advocate," says Krooks. "But that's better than years, which is what many people experience." And when finding long-term solutions to needs, it often helps to have an outside party review any decisions.

"The government may be their ally in some cases, but over time as injuries pile up, people can go bankrupt with medical care," he says. Krooks tells of one client who was pleased that a veteran's entire medical care was being addressed, but never realized at the same time the veteran was eligible for a \$1,600 monthly pension.

"If you don't represent the veterans' concerns, they (The VA) won't always give you the information," he says, which is why there's an increasing demand for legal challenges and services such as those provided by accredited attorneys such as Krooks, as well as Veteran Service Organizations.

"I just think there's not enough attention paid to the veterans," says Krooks, "and it's a big bureaucracy."