

Military criticized for lack of medals database

Searchable records could help identify false claims

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Lawmakers on Wednesday criticized the Defense Department for failing to create a searchable database of medals recipients, a potential solution to identifying and prosecuting people who falsely claim to have received the honors.

Witnesses from the Veterans of Foreign Wars and a privately run medals database joined GOP Rep. Jason Chaffetz, chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform subcommittee investigating the matter, in rejecting assertions by Pentagon officials about major improvements in military recordkeeping.

Anyone making false claims of receiving military honors could be prosecuted under a 2006 law, the Stolen Valor Act. Conviction could mean imprisonment for up to six months, or up to a year for false claims of receiving the Medal of Honor. The Supreme Court is considering whether the law is constitutional.

The House hearing focused on military records, which are maintained by individual services and the National Personnel Records Center. Witnesses representing the military services said there are computer databases of military records, but not one dedicated to medals.

"We are fundamentally failing to fulfill this mission" of identifying false claims, Chaffetz said. "This has gone on far too long. ... Why can't we create a database of what medals they earned? It's totally unacceptable."

James Nierle, president of the Navy's Board of Decorations and Medals, said that "in a perfect world ... to have those in a database would be of some benefit." He said the question is whether the cost is worth the benefit.

Chaffetz said it would be. That view was endorsed by C. Douglas Sterner, curator of the Military Times "Hall of Valor," which maintains a private medals database, and Joseph Davis, director of public affairs for the Washington office of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States.

Citing figures from the Department of Veterans Affairs inspector general, Chaffetz said there were 78 arrests from stolen valor investigations between Jan. 1, 2010, and Sept. 30, 2011.

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