

Vietnam Veterans of America: Lawsuit challenges DoD's leaking of personal information belonging to active duty and veterans

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(Washington, DC) - Vietnam Veterans of America filed a federal lawsuit today, in order to end the Department of Defense's systematic violation of veterans' and service members' privacy rights. DoD operates a website that reveals details pertaining to the military service of millions of veterans and service members to anybody at all, anonymously, for any purpose. The website discloses sensitive details, including exact dates of active-duty service, future dates of call-up to active duty, and branch and unit of service.

"Veterans and active duty military are disproportionately targeted by scammers and identity thieves," said John Rowan, President of VVA. "DoD is fueling the problem by leaving personal and private information easily accessible on the internet, and DoD has refused to properly secure this information," noted Rowan. "We are asking a court to order them to do so." The case was filed in federal court in Buffalo, N.Y., by Vietnam Veterans of America, the VVA New York State Council, VVA Chapter 77, and VVA member Thomas Barden.

Thomas Barden, a retired Air Force Master Sergeant, was defrauded by scammers who gained his trust through the use of private details accessible on the DoD website. "We expect the military to protect our private information," said Barden. "The government should not be giving con artists and scammers easy access to information they can use to rip-off veterans like me." The DoD website allows anybody to search for an individual's record, simply by inputting a last name and birthdate (or social security number).

"Veterans and service members face a multitude of challenges when they return home. Many veterans want control over who learns details about their service in order to avoid stereotypes, prejudice, or worse," said Mike Walker, President of VVA Chapter 77, in Tonawanda, NY. "The government is taking that decision out of our hands by operating this unsecured online database."

"The site, which receives 2.3 billion queries every year, is intended for the exclusive use of banks and other regulated institutions to verify whether an individual is on active duty and, therefore, entitled to certain legal protections, but DoD does not limit access in any way and has no idea how many of those searches are illegitimate," said Jonathan Manes, supervising attorney at the Civil Liberties and Transparency Clinic of the University at Buffalo School of Law, which represents the plaintiffs in the lawsuit. Plaintiffs are represented by student attorneys Jessica Gill, Arthur Heberle, and Thora Knight of the UB School of Law under the supervision of Assistant Clinical Professor Manes.