

Veteran awarded benefits for World War II service

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Carl Kirkwood, 90, of Riverside Apartments, working with U.S. Rep. Jason Altmire and his staff, has been awarded a 20 percent disability benefit for his frostbitten feet.

"I'm pleased with the way things turned out," Kirkwood said yesterday at a press conference at the veterans monument at the foot of Court Street. Previously, he said he was celebrating "one of the best holidays since the end of World War II."

Altmire said he was pleased to have helped.

"It's a shame that our veterans have to go through such obstacles,"

Altmire said Kirkwood had contacted the Veterans Administration in June 2006, seeking assistance, but his claim was rejected at every hearing.

"He contacted my office in August 2007," he explained. "In about 11 months — in June 2008 — we were able to get the VA to re-evaluate his case. We sent letters of support to help Mr. Kirkwood to get the benefits that he deserves."

Working with Kevin Noel of the Disabled American Veterans, J. Randall Stapleford, Altmire's veterans and military outreach coordinator, was able to obtain a 20 percent disability rating benefit for Kirkwood.

"The next step is to increase the benefits," said Stapleford, who is a retired Navy captain.

"I'm happy with the service the congressman has provided," Kirkwood said.

He added he will remain with the Disabled American Veterans to pursue his claim.

"I'm going to fire the VFW," Kirkwood said, noting that for the past two years that veterans group has been unsuccessful in getting him benefits.

Kirkwood is now eligible for free medical care and will receive a fixed payment each month. He also has received back payments for his disability dating to 2006 when he first filed his claim.

Altmire noted that Kirkwood was scheduled for a hearing on his claim, "But between the involvement of the DAV and my office bringing pressure to bear, he got the benefit without the hearing.

"It is unfortunate that it took so long to resolve this," Altmire said. "This man is an American hero. He had the facts and the story on his side. Our government has a moral obligation to support the men and women who fought for our country."

Stapleford noted the congressman's office has 212 active veterans cases.

He added the office works with Shirley Noga, Lawrence County's veterans affairs director, to help to resolve local cases.

Stapleford said some veterans, like Kirkwood, are entitled to benefits but their cases are complicated by a lack of military records.

In Kirkwood's case, his records were lost in a fire in a St. Louis storage facility. He spent time and energy recompiling his military record, he said, "but until (Altmire's) involvement, what I had was never enough."