

As communities across the nation and especially in Southern Missouri gather this weekend to honor Americans who have given their lives in defense of our freedoms, a great injustice lingers for the veterans we are fortunate to have in our families, workplaces and communities. The average amount of time needed to process a disability claim now stands at 400 days.

For disabled servicemembers leaving the military, this means they must wait longer than a year to process their discharges, changing their status from active duty to veteran. This delay means they must put off plans to attend college, turn down offers of employment, and wait, wait, wait to start their lives as veterans who honorably served.

And even though the system is clearly not working, it is being expanded. By fall, the Integrated Disability Evaluation System will grow from 80 military installations to 140.

The idea is a good one – consolidate the medical evaluations and paperwork from the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs. But, in practice, this process is taking much longer than it should. Even worse than costing veterans opportunities in their return to civilian life, the system delays benefits which members of our military have clearly earned and deserve.

It's hard to believe, but the system is heading in the right direction. Under the previous guidelines for disability evaluation, the process took 540 days on average to complete. But the new system remains understaffed and unwieldy.

The target for the new program is to have disabled servicemembers processed and discharged within nine months – all their tests complete, their benefits set to begin, and their paperwork all processed. But even that may not be quick enough. It's not too much to expect military precision in scheduling medical evaluations, approving payments and starting the young men and women of our all-volunteer armed services out on a new path in life.

Nor should these tasks take overly long for veterans at any age, when service-connected injuries and conditions may emerge. I can't tell you how many times I've talked to veterans who feel left behind by the system which is supposed to honor them. They shouldn't need anyone's

help getting the attention of the people who operate a network of benefits and medical care on their behalf. Four hundred days is too long to wait for our country to honor its promise to them.

For those who have fallen on the field of battle, Memorial Day is a time of remembrance, honor and respect. For their families, Memorial Day is a recognition of their strength and sacrifice. For those veterans who survive the battle, Memorial Day reminds us of the risks taken for our freedom, the price nearly paid.

In all these cases, we are required to do our utmost to serve the American men and women who have served us, and our country, so well.