

To the Subcommittee on Benefits Committee on Veterans' Affairs United States House
Of Representatives

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I will identify the areas that the veterans feel need the most attention from Congress:

First the amount of paperwork and time it takes to get registered in the Veterans' Administration (VA) system for a VA identification card is excessive.

Following that process, the veteran usually has to wait for at least 6 (six) months for their first appointment to see a Primary Care Physician. This does not include additional time for appointments with any specialists and test results that may be necessary to file a claim.

For a "working" veteran, this may be difficult due to having to take time off from their job. Claims are adjudicated sometimes before a veteran even sees a doctor.

There are still some VA physicians unwilling to state an opinion in writing for the veteran to help support the veteran's claim. However, there is a VA directive that states that VA physicians shall provide statements and opinions for the veteran (see attached exhibit "A").

Patients feel that they are being over-medicated instead of being treated for their illnesses or injuries.

Transportation problems obstruct filing of veterans' claims. Here in El Paso where we have only an "outpatient" VA clinic rather than a full facility VA hospital, many patients are sent to see doctors at the VA hospital in Albuquerque, New Mexico, which is approximately 250 miles away. Many of our elderly veterans do not have the ability to drive the distance and have no other means of transportation. Many are being told that it is the responsibility of the veteran to arrange their own transportation to make their appointment. This interferes and causes delays for claims processing.

On January 2001, a local VA Rater who had an "open door" policy to assist veterans who had "special" claims, retired. Prior to that as a chapter service officer, at the claimant's request. I was assisting the veteran by going with them to the local VA Rater to discuss their case. This also helped eliminate prolonged processing time. If I had followed regular procedures by trying to handle a "special" claim through my own organization, at the Regional Office in Waco, Texas, there were a number of times that I would be told that the National Service Officer who was assigned to the case was unavailable at the time and that my phone call would be returned. In most cases, my phone calls were not returned and I would continue trying to contact the National Service Officer assigned to the case and again be told that the person was not available. This definitely caused problems and delays on a claim and would also frustrate the veteran as well.

On June 2001, the other service officer in my chapter and I made a visit to our organization's Regional Office in Waco and met with the Regional Office National Service Officers' supervisor to try to form a team that my associate chapter service officer and I could process "special" claims through. The Regional Office National Service Officers' supervisor was at that time informed that both my associate and I were taking "special" claims to a local VA Rater with the claimant present until the local VA Rater had retired. The Regional Office National Service Officers' supervisor had told both myself and my associate that he had no complaints about us taking claims to the local VA Rater and that he was at that time unwilling to form a team or system to assist us.

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This has caused adverse results on some claims we have handled. For instance, there was a claim by a widow whose husband passed away prior to him receiving a compensation/pension (C&P) exam. There was also a veteran's claim where a mistake was found that the VA made, but our National Service Officer in Waco just signed off on the claim and the claim had to go through process again to be fixed.

Since that time, because we have taken steps to assist the veteran in their best interest, our Chapter has been put under indefinite suspension, not less than 90 (ninety) days, from doing any service officer work (see attached exhibits "B" and "C").

This action has greatly affected approximately 400+ claims existing and new both within our own community and outside (see attached exhibit "D"). For example, a veteran who sought my assistance in another state to assist with their claim has been recategorized from "expedite" to taking up to 24 (twenty-four) months before it is reviewed while it remains inactive in the hands of a VA Rater (see attached exhibits "E" and "F").

Having a local Regional VA Office would help eliminate processing time and expedite "special" cases to cut down on the "backlog" of cases which both the VA Regional Office and Regional Office of our organization claim to have. This means that various organizations would have to allow their chapter/post service officers to utilize the local Regional VA Office directly for "special" claims.

My objective is to assist the veteran to gain their entitlements within a reasonable time and fulfill the mission stated by my organization (see attached exhibit "G").

Mr. Chairman, the veterans appreciate the oversight provided by this committee in helping the Veterans Board of Appeals meet its responsibility to our nation's veterans and their families.

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