

## TESTIMONY

John B. McKinney, El Paso, Texas, April 26, 2002  
to the  
Subcommittee on Benefits, Veterans Affairs Committee  
U.S. House of Representatives

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for coming to El Paso to allow us to present to you our concerns involving the management of disability claims for our veterans. The Department of Veterans Affairs annual booklet entitled Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents states, and I quote, "Disability compensation is a monetary benefit paid to veterans who are disabled by injury or disease incurred or aggravated during active military service." Unquote. This compensation is an entitlement, not discretionary, due the individual for having served his or her country but who, when separated, returned to civilian life in a physical condition adversely different than when he or she entered military service. This being the case, we fail to understand why the disability claims processing system, which has been in effect for years, often seems to fail the very veteran and others it is designed to help. What part of veteran and what part of entitlement is it that the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Veterans Benefit Administration, responsible for disability claims, seems not to understand? The problems with claims processing seem to worsen as time goes on yet our Government continues to depend on our military, the future veterans, to serve political objectives, sending men and women into harms way without the right to decline assignments or missions and the lack of conventional worker compensation coverage. If the current system cannot take care of today's veterans in a timely, efficient manner, what can future veterans expect?

You are fully aware of the increasing backlog of veteran claims and appeals, easily approaching the 600,000 level, with applications increasing as recognition is given to additional Agent Orange effects and blood borne diseases. We have yet to know what health issues may come from the war in Afghanistan that the Government will initially

deny then admit to. We accept that as applications increase there may be a lengthening in the claims process but we also expect our government to react accordingly, being pro-active, not reactive. We hear from the Secretary of Veterans Affairs that the problems with claims are being and have been identified and will be addressed. He asks us to just give him time, about two years. Even some of our national Veterans Service Organizations tell their members to just wait. Both are unacceptable.

World War II veterans are dying at the rate of over 1300 daily. In two years we will lose over 949,000. How many of these will die while waiting for their entitlement? Yes, the Veterans Benefit Administration initiated Tiger Teams to address claims of many of these older veterans, but why does it take special treatment to address an entitlement? And what of Korean War veterans approaching the same years in their lives as these World War II veterans? More Tiger Teams to adjudicate their lingering claims as they begin to die at increasing rates. What help is it to tell a veteran his claim is finally being addressed after being in the system for two years and him having reached the age of 70 or older. What help is it only to have that veteran die without ever getting his entitlement because of a system that failed him? And what of his family, who may have gained some financial benefit had the claim been approved while the veteran was alive?

The disability claims processing system seems to be oriented more on how much the Government can save by inefficient management rather than what can it do to compensate the veteran for service to the country. The sad part is that the system is people, people whom veterans believe forget those who served, those entitled to compensation for disabilities. Yes, there are invalid claims and they, too, take time to process and weed out. We accept that. But what of the veteran who feels that he has waited long enough for a claims decision, who calls a regional office seeking information, gets to speak to a computer and not a person, or gets told his records are not available or still being worked on, and leaves with the feeling that because he sought information his record will be placed on the bottom of the stack rather than

being replaced where it was? How is he being served by the very Government who demanded or expected his service, his loyalty, and his dedication? Simply stated, he isn't.

I am sure you are familiar with the Cooper Report which identified many issues with the Veterans Benefit Administration. Admiral Cooper is now in a position to correct or attempt to correct the same issues his task force identified. The question which needs to be asked is why has it taken so long for someone to identify personnel shortages, lack of adequate and effective training, lack of properly motivated employees, poor management, lack of adequate supervision, lack of accountability and the many other things identified as contributors to a poor claims processing system? Where was the necessary oversight from outside the Veterans Benefit Administration and even outside the Department of Veterans Affairs? Where are the changes to the Civil Service rules and regulations which could expedite the release or termination of ineffective and inefficient employees who place themselves above the veteran they were and are obligated to serve? Why can a private company or corporation terminate employees for failure to perform their jobs with a "pink slip" yet the Federal Government requires a burdensome bureaucratic process to accomplish the same thing? Are federal employees above everyone else? I think not, nor should you. Congress manages the purse strings and should provide the oversight seemingly lacking here. Congress should be demanding and getting results. All of these problems exist using taxpayer dollars.

The Congressional solution always seems to be to provide more money for more employees. More people in the processing system will equate to more processors and more timely results. New people take time to be trained. Older, qualified, and I emphasize the qualified, people need to train the new ones, thus slowing down the process. And, while being trained, attrition will reduce those qualified to teach. Which again takes us back to Congress saying the system needs even more people. What about ensuring those in the system do the job they were hired to do or terminate them?

What about terminating, not just relocating, those supervisors who do not demand quality performance or who do not exercise quality supervision? Accountability doesn't seem to be part of the claims processing process.

Last, let me briefly address a local claims issue. The Waco Regional Office initiated a local program designed to expedite the pre-discharge program for disability claims. A Veterans Benefit Administration claims processing office was opened which significantly enhanced this program, yet did nothing for other local veterans. Frustration set in when an exceptionally well-qualified individual in this office indicated a willingness and desire to help these latter individuals, then departed; we were then told the same assistance would be reinitiated but with less qualified individuals, whose supervisor is 600 miles away. Is this adequate service to the veteran? Hardly. Why do we have to continually be faced with frustrations concerning our entitlements? The Veterans Healthcare Administration recognized the need to bring healthcare closer to the veteran and reacted by adding, and continues to add, Community Based Outpatient Clinics to its healthcare program. Where are the Veterans Benefits Local Veterans Assistance Offices, adequately staffed, managed and supervised, designed to bring benefits assistance closer to the veteran?

The question which must be addressed in all of this is, when will the veteran come first and not the process?

I thank you for your time and attention.