

Statement of the Honorable Richard H. Baker, Member of Congress
Sixth Congressional District, State of Louisiana

U.S. House of Representatives
Veterans' Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Benefits

July 9, 2001

Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Reyes, and members of the Subcommittee:

I commend you for holding this hearing and focusing on means by which constituent services may be improved at the Veterans Affairs Administration. I have recently introduced H.R.1746 which I believe is a good step in the right direction. Please know that I am always open to suggestions on how this measure can be improved. I also want to acknowledge and thank the committee staff for their diligent work and assistance in crafting this legislation.

I believe there is a definite need for a centralized location where veterans can receive accurate, up-to-date and comprehensive information. The one thing I have learned in my years of constituent service in Congress is that a nice and considerate “NO” is much better than a long delay and being ignored. We are not in the position to promise everybody everything, or to attempt to solve every problem by spending every nickel in the world, but we are all in the constituent service business, and a prompt answer to inquiries is expected. The technology to accomplish this is available and I believe it is an investment that the VA must make for our veterans.

Over the course of my service in Congress, many of my veterans have told me that while they know they are entitled to certain benefits, they are not really sure what the benefits are. I’m sure that each one of us here has had similar conversations with veterans. In all fairness, I think it proper to state that the VA has endeavored, through their outreach programs, to disseminate information about available benefits to veterans through a variety of means.

However, Congress has an obligation to ask the question, “Have these efforts been successful?” I think the answer to this question lies in the results of the 1999 Survey of Veterans’ Satisfaction with the VA Compensation and Pension Claim Process. This survey reported, among other items, the following:

- 55.9% of veterans rate their own knowledge of VA benefits as excellent, very good, or good;
- 37.8% of veterans believe the VA keeps them apprised of the full range of available benefits and services; and,
- 26.8% of veterans verified that the VA told them about other benefits for which they might be eligible.

We must ask ourselves whether or not this is satisfactory. Should we be satisfied that almost 56 percent of our veterans have a good knowledge of their benefits? Should we be satisfied that only 38 percent of veterans feel they are kept informed of their benefits? Finally, do we believe the VA has an obligation to ensure that veterans are well informed of their benefits across-the-board, regardless of the initial inquiry or the administering agency? My feeling is, and I believe the subcommittee will agree with me, that more needs to be done. As I said before, we are all in the constituent services business here in Congress, and each of us knows first-hand the importance of getting that part of our jobs right.

From this survey, it appears that veterans must know a specific question to ask in order to feel

satisfied with VA outreach programs. That veterans do not have a great deal of knowledge of benefits for which they are eligible from the VA is troubling. Even more problematic is that many veterans are unaware of the services available to them that are not administered by the VA. While the VA administers roughly 80-90% of veterans benefits, there are other federal agencies that also offer veterans benefits. This includes agencies such as the Small Business Administration, the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Labor.

In the current economy, access to information is deemed to be one of the most important (if not the most important) tools by which an individual may reach a decision. In my judgement, there is no exception to this rule for our veterans. As a remedy, I have proposed creating one central avenue through which veterans can access information on all available services and benefits to which they may be entitled. Currently, there is no single facility which accomplishes this purpose.

To maximize the benefit to veterans, the contact center should be a responsive, efficient, and dependable medium for information exchange with the agency, whether the contact is made via telephone, email, fax, or through the agency's web site. Those applications that can be automated should be automated. When personal assistance is needed, a veteran should be promptly connected to a Benefits Counselor who is best-matched to meet that veteran's needs. Ideally, a veteran should not have to be "re-introduced" every time they call. The counselor should have information about the veteran readily available regarding the veteran's prior contact with the agency as well as the current benefits the veteran may already be receiving.

Although this center would be administered by the VA, it would serve as a conduit to other federal agencies where veterans could request and receive information. One possible way to organize this is to provide additional training to those employees who staff the current VA Help Line.

Other topics in the system could include:

- _ Listings of the offices of state and county departments of veterans affairs;
- _ Community resources (telephone hotlines and homeless shelters);
- _ Military resources (TRICARE offices, military hospitals, and ID card issuers); and,
- _ VA facilities (VA medical centers, Vet Centers, VBA regional and satellite offices, and cemeteries).

Every aspect of the system's design should be shaped by experienced employees who have a rich understanding of users' needs. There are a wealth of qualified and compassionate employees who have spent years in the VA and VBA who know (a) how potential users think, (b) what questions veterans frequently ask, and (c) where misunderstandings most often occur. Their expertise will make an invaluable contribution to the success of this contact center.

I believe we can honor our veterans by helping improve the information they receive. Some may say that this is a small project, but I believe that it is the small things that count the most. Our veterans will appreciate the commitment to provide them with prompt, comprehensive and

improved services.

Finally, I submit for the record a letter I recently received from my constituent, Mr. James Tindle, on June 21, 2001. Mr. Tindle's letter describes the difficulties he experienced in an encounter with the VA Debt Management Center. After reading his letter, I became even more committed to this endeavor.