

STATEMENT SUBMITTED BY

FREDERICK G. BITNER

**LOCAL PRESIDENT
AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO
LOCAL 610**

TO

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFIARS
OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE**

AT THE INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA, FIELD HEARING

**ON MANAGEMENT AND DELEIVERY OF BENEFITS
AT THE
VETERANS' BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION
INDIANAPOLIS REGIONAL OFFICE**

SEPTEMBER 5, 2001

Chairman Buyer and Representative Carson, my name is Frederick G. Bitner. I am the President of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) Local 610 and I am a service-connected disabled veteran. AFGE Local 610 is proud to represent 131 workers at the Indianapolis Regional Office of the Veterans' Benefits Administration (VBA). The men and women AFGE Local 610 represents care deeply about providing benefits and services to veterans and their families. The employees at the Indianapolis VBA Regional Office want to provide veterans and their families with responsive, timely and compassionate service.

We applaud you for holding this oversight hearing and appreciate the opportunity to share with you the perspective of the front-line workforce on how Congress and VBA can improve the delivery of benefits to veterans and their families.

In the past several years a confluence of three trends has made work at the VBA more chaotic and difficult.

First, the nature of compensation and pension (or C&P) adjudication has grown increasingly complex and legalistic. Preparing or rating a compensation claim requires the ability to review and evaluate technical medical information by complex legal standards of proof. For example, claims dealing with Gulf War Syndrome and Agent Orange exposure often deal with issues of statistical risk and exposure rates. These claims are a very different from than the claims dealt with for most WWII veterans.

Second, at the same time that the presumptions involved with claims and establishment of claims have become more complex and legalistic, management has responded with new initiatives, shifts in philosophy, transformations in priorities, new benchmarks, and new computer programs. While each initiative du jour may have merit, in aggregate they create a constant state of reorganization and revamping of processes. This reduces our effectiveness. The constant and chaotic state of change is hard on employees. It distracts us from "the prize" --- to provide veterans with responsive and quality service.

Third, our workforce is changing. In anticipation of the nearing retirement of more and more VBA claims examiners, VBA has begun to hire new staff. This means that at our office we have a group of employees who are very seasoned and experienced, and a group of Veterans Service Representatives who are still learning many of the basics of C&P.

What can be done systemically to respond to these trends?

AFGE Local 610 urges continued support for training. VBA employees need recurring training. Whenever Congress establishes or modifies new presumptions we need training to ensure that veterans receive consistent and

fair claims development and adjudication under these new or modified standards. Whenever case law significantly alters processes or standards of proof we need training. Currently, such training is not the norm.

VBA has now instituted centralized training for newly hired Veterans Service Representatives (commonly referred to as claims examiners.) However, there is a significant number of employees who were hired in the past two years who are not included in this training. Employees hired one year ago are mentored by a experienced examiner but do not receive the centralized training. These “mentored” employees need equivalent training and all employees need recurring training as new presumptions are established or standards of proof are modified.

I can't emphasize enough how important proper training and recurring training is to ensure the timely and accurate processing of veterans' claims. One AFGE Local 610 member, who is a newer employee, told me that she cringes when she thinks about how her lack of training might result in mistakes that impact on our clients.

AFGE 610 also believes that the grade-level for Rating Veterans Service Representatives, or rating specialists, should be revisited. The job has been a General Schedule 12 (GS-12) for at least 30 years. Rating a veterans disability claim has gotten more technical, complicated and legalistic. If we are to retain experienced ratings specialists and provide a career ladder for new claims examiners we must recognize that a rating specialist is more on par with a GS-13. Chairman Buyer and Representative Carson, I urge you to press VBA to approach the Office of Personnel Management to raise the grade level of Rating Veterans Service Representatives.

AFGE Local 610 also urges you to continue oversight of VBA's use of centralized processing of claims. We are concerned that veterans may feel alienated when they cannot visit a local office to meet with a claims examiner to discuss their case.

I thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony.