

**National Association of County
Veterans Service Officers**

**Testimony of
Ann G. Knowles, President**

before the

United States House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and
Memorial Affairs

109th Congress

On

March 16, 2006

Testimony of
Ann G. Knowles, President
National Association of
County Veterans Service Officers

INTRODUCTION

Chairman Miller, members of the Subcommittee, it is truly my honor to be able to present this testimony before you. As President of the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers, I am commenting on:

- Recommendations for the improvements to the accuracy and quality of service provided by the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) to individuals calling into the VBA.
- Recommendations for the creation of a new Federal/State/Local Government Partnership to provide Outreach to Veterans and their dependents.

The National Association of County Veterans Service Officers is an organization made up of local government employees. Our members are tasked with assisting veterans in developing and processing their claims. Between 75 and 90% of the claims presented to the Veterans Administration each year originate in a county veterans office. Our members sit across from those men and women who wish to file a claim each day. They are our friends and neighbors, members of our communities, whom we see daily. We exist to serve veterans and partner with the National Service Organizations and the Department of Veterans Affairs to serve veterans. Our Association focuses on outreach, standardized quality of training, and claims development and advocacy. We are an extension or arm of government, not unlike the VA itself, in service to the nation's veterans and their dependents.

Our workforce represents approximately 2,400 employees from 28 states available to partner with the Department of Veterans Affairs to help speed the process of claims development and transition of our military personnel to civilian life.

Upon discharge, the service man or woman becomes a veteran who returns to a local community. When health issues become apparent and help is needed the most visible and accessible assistance is the County Veterans Service Officer. As we sit here today discussing the needs of the veterans across this great land it soon becomes evident that there are many areas that need attention. Outreach and claims processing improvements are essential if we are to fulfill the obligation proclaimed by Abraham Lincoln "...To care for him, who shall have borne the battle and for his widows and orphans..." This is our focus and passion.

VBA's Telephone Units

It appears the majority of the problems center around new staff with a lack of knowledge of Veterans Administration (VA) programs, and a disinterest in assisting the veteran or the veteran service officer of record, if it requires looking up the answer on more than one computer system. When a veteran calls the number and requests the status of his or her claim the answer shouldn't be "that request will have to be made in writing." DEFINITELY THE WRONG ANSWER. That is not the only wrong advice given, on many occasions veterans and widows have been advised NOT TO FILE A CLAIM, this is the worst kind of bad information. How many of those veterans or dependents will never receive benefits because of bad information? When a veteran or dependent calls for help there should be a ready response of "If I don't know I'll find out and get right back to you."

The Veterans Administration needs to train the staff at the phone units on how the VA medical system works. They have little or no understanding of how basic health services operate (such as In-Home Care, Adult Day Care, and how to file for Unauthorized Health Care at a Non-VA medical center). Basic questions such as where to send the paperwork and how long a veteran has to file a claim should be answered by the phone units. It isn't just a lack of knowledge of the VA medical system that causes county service officers to distrust the information coming out of these phone units, but many times even the answers on basic claims or appeals is incorrect and misleading.

The service officers expect to be given information when calling on any veteran they represent. It is not uncommon to be told, by the employee manning the phone, we can't give you that information if the veteran isn't with you in the office. The goal of everyone assisting veterans with benefits should be to do what it takes to get veterans the benefits they so justly deserve. The people on the phones for the VA should be some of the best trained in the system.

If first impressions mean anything, the first point of contact with the VA, 1 (800) 827-1000, has left a bad impression on many a veteran, dependent and county service officer.

SO LET'S FIX IT

At one Regional Office in Florida, the Service Center Manager has issued an order to all phone room personnel to 1). Fully cooperate with the County Veterans Service Officers that call in. 2). Maintain a current listing of County Veterans Service Officers by county for verification purposes, and 3). Installed and manned, with highly qualified personnel, a special phone number for County Veterans Service Officers. This is the beginning of a true partnership between the Veterans Administration and County Veterans Service Officers in Florida. What we need is more of these kinds of cooperative relationships throughout the nation.

OUTREACH

Outreach means different things to different people. Outreach to the County Veterans Service Officer means directly touching a veteran and his dependents. The VA concept of outreach is to put posters in the VA hospitals, clinics, Vet Center and publishing in the Service Organization magazines. Both of these methods have the ability to reach a certain segment of veterans.

The outreach that I will address is the hands-on approach. Across our nation there are veterans that do not think that they are a veteran because they did not lose a limb or get injured in any way. They came home and started to work to support their families. They have never looked for any help from the government. When the veteran dies, their families still do not know that they are entitled to benefits just because their husband or father served his country. These are the people that need outreach. They are mostly lower income and have never reached out to the VA and therefore they don't think they are entitled to this help.

I look at rural North Carolina and see the great need to make these veterans aware that they deserve benefits, that they are earned entitlements not welfare. These veterans have never made use of the VAMC's, the GI Bill, Home Loan, Pension or Compensation Benefits. They just served their country and came home. It is so rewarding when you meet one of these veterans and tell them what they may be entitled to and see the hope on their face. It sometimes means the difference in eating or buying medicine. I am sure if a study was completed, you would see a large number of rural veterans have never used the VA for any service and did not know that they could. The VA has a responsibility to reach out and make everyone aware of their entitlement. One of the ways is for the County Veterans Service Officer to speak to groups and ask them to spread the word. Another way is to go into the nursing homes and assisted living homes to assist the veterans and dependents.

We have the obligation to try and reach the 853,000 veterans and 1.1 million dependents that the Knight Ridder report indicated that were missing benefits. I am sure this number will increase with the returning troops. We would like to think that everyone is knowledgeable about their benefits, but we as county veterans service officers see every day that this is not true. We are telling the newly returning troops of their benefits. This is mainly due to the fact that the servicemen and women do not take the time to learn of their benefits. They are just like their fathers and grandfathers before them, they are ready to go home and get on with their lives.

Outreach efforts must be expanded in order to reach those veterans, dependents and survivors that are unaware of their benefits and to bring them into the system. Nearly 2 million poor veterans or their impoverished widows are likely missing out on as much as \$22 billion a year in pensions from the U.S. government, but the Department of Veterans Affairs has had only limited success in finding them, according to the North Carolina Charlotte Observer.

Widows are hardest hit. According to the VA's own estimate, **only one in seven** of the survivors of the nation's deceased Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines who likely could qualify for the pension actually get the monthly checks. What's more, participation in the program is falling. **Veterans and widows are unaware that the program exists.** They simply don't know about it and the VA knows that many are missing out on the benefit. "We obviously are here for any veteran or survivor who qualifies," said a VA Pension official. **"But so many of these people – we don't know who they are, where they are."** The VA's own report from late 2004 recommended that the agency "improve its outreach efforts" with public service announcements and other pilot programs. While it made limited efforts to reach veterans or their widows through existing channels, it is difficult to determine whether such efforts have been successful.

Nonetheless, one VA estimate of the program shows the potential pool of poor veterans and widows without the pensions has remained unchanged the past four years. The total number of pension cases fell to 541,000 in fiscal 2005, the sixth straight year of declines. The VA actuary's office predicts that pension participation is likely to drop further, losing between 7,000 and 8,000 enrollees a year and falling below 500,000 participants by 2012, according to a VA actuary report obtained by Knight Ridder.

Of all those likely eligible, only 27% of veterans and 14% of widows receive the money. It is obvious that there is a great need for outreach into the veteran's community and the local CVSO is the advocate closest to the veterans and widows. With minimal funding they could reach the maximum number of eligible veterans and widows. Therefore, NACVSO is supporting HR 4264 and its companion bill S 1990, introduced by Congressman Mike McIntyre and Senator Richard Burr, of North Carolina, that would allow Secretary Nicholson to provide federal-state-local grants and assistance to state and county veterans service officers to enhance outreach to veterans and their dependents. We are already present in most communities and stand ready to assist the Department of Veterans Affairs with this monumental task.

CONCLUSION

This concludes my comments.

If I commented on any items of interest to the Committee on Veterans Affairs, NACVSO stands ready to expand on our comments or suggestions for improving services to veterans.

Thank you.