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STATEMENT OF
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VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE
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Senator Begich and Members of the Committee, it is my pleasure to be here today to discuss our efforts in meeting the needs of Veterans residing in Alaska.

The Anchorage Regional Office (RO) serves Veterans throughout the state. We also provide outreach services to Veterans in Fairbanks, Fort Wainwright, Fort Richardson, Elmendorf Air Force Base, and Eielson Air Force Base.

The Anchorage RO administers the following benefits and services:

- Disability compensation and pension for Veterans and dependents;
- Vocational rehabilitation and employment (VR&E) assistance; and,
- Outreach for all Veteran and survivor benefits.

Our goal is to deliver these comprehensive and diverse benefits and services in a timely, accurate, and compassionate manner.

The Anchorage RO is responsible for delivering non-medical VA benefits and services to over 76,400 Veterans and their families in Alaska. Approximately 14,000 of these Veterans receive disability compensation. In fiscal year 2009, the Anchorage RO completed more than 2,100 decisions on Veterans' disability claims.

The Denver Regional Loan Center (RLC) administers VA home loan services to Alaska Veterans. Alaska Veterans are served by a full time RLC employee who is stationed at the Anchorage RO. Most Native lands are leasehold estates, which qualify for VA's guaranteed loan program. VA has guaranteed 65,575 home loans in Alaska with a cumulative loan amount of over \$9 billion.

Staffing

The Anchorage RO hired five employees as a result of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The employees are making direct contributions to improving claims processing by assisting with development of claims and mail processing. Currently, 34 employees work in the Veterans Service Center (VSC) and 7 employees work in VR&E.

Employees at the Anchorage RO are very motivated and provide excellent service to Alaska Veterans. Performance measures indicate that the Anchorage RO is performing well, completing a greater number of claims each month while improving accuracy.

Management Team

As the out-based Director of the Anchorage RO, I visit Anchorage at least quarterly and hold weekly videoconference calls with division management to maintain open lines of communication. In addition, I hold a weekly conference call with the Veterans Service Center Manager (VSCM) to provide direction and oversight. I also communicate regularly with the Anchorage VA Medical Center Director, as the Anchorage RO is currently co-located with the Medical Center.

A new VA clinic is scheduled to open in May 2010, and the Veterans Benefits Administration has secured space at the new site. The Anchorage RO is looking forward to moving into this new space as it will allow VSOs and all claims files to be located in the RO. The new facility will also include a large training room.

In June 2009, a new VSCM reported for duty in Anchorage. The VSCM position was vacant for approximately eight months due to the sometimes-difficult task of finding an individual with the right leadership and managerial skills to fit the position. Many times relocating an employee and his/her family to Alaska is difficult.

Additionally, the Anchorage RO recruited and hired two new supervisors. The appointment of the new supervisors has had a positive impact on the overall management and performance of the office this fiscal year.

For example, rating inventory has trended in a positive direction every month this year. Compared to December of last year, the Anchorage RO completed 226 more claims this year, an increase of 16 percent. In addition, rating and authorization quality have both improved. Rating quality at the Anchorage RO exceeds the national average.

A new training plan was developed and implemented in September 2009. Rating Veteran Service Representatives (RVSRs) receive weekly training from the Decision Review Officer. Training topics are aimed at eliminating the errors found during various reviews. All RVSRs attend the monthly Systematic Technical Accuracy Review calls to discuss commonly found errors and to prevent future errors.

The Anchorage RO's VR&E division is one of the top performing divisions in the nation. Identified as a top performer in fiscal year 2009, the VR&E division was awarded Level II performance award.

Outreach Efforts

Our employees conduct an average of 580 personal interviews per month, and last year conducted 47 Transitional Assistance Program (TAP) briefings for 1,078 service members. VR&E personnel provide monthly DTAP briefings at Elmendorf Air Force Base and Fort Wainwright.

The Anchorage RO conducted two significant rural outreach initiatives in 2009. In February and March, the RO participated jointly with the Alaska VA Health Care System to offer Alaska VA Education Forums. Teams traveled to Kotzebue, Fairbanks, Nome, Dillingham, Ketchikan, Juneau, and Sitka to provide benefits information and counseling to Veterans and medical providers.

We also participated in two Homeless Standdowns at Fort Richardson and in Fairbanks in August 2009. An RO representative provided information and VA benefits counseling at these events. Earlier this month, a Standdown was held to introduce Veterans to the VA Domiciliary facility in Anchorage.

In October 2009, the Anchorage RO teamed with the Medical Center to staff an information booth for 500 Veterans and family members via the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN). AFN is the largest statewide Native organization in Alaska. Its membership includes 178 villages (both federally-recognized tribes and village corporations), 13 regional Native corporations and 12 regional nonprofit and tribal consortiums that contract and run federal and state programs.

As of December 31, 2009, 134 service members were participating in the DoD/VA Disability Evaluation System Pilot at Ft. Wainwright, Ft. Richardson, and Elmendorf AFB. This pilot is instrumental in streamlining disability processing for separating service members.

Improvements in Service Delivery

The new management team successfully implemented several new workload management and quality assurance policies and procedures.

A policy for the timely corrective action of errors identified by VBA's Systematic Technical Accuracy Review Staff was implemented in November 2009. The VSCM tracks all errors and corrective actions. A review process was established to ensure Veterans Service Representatives (VSRs) correctly enter claims data into our processing systems. Refresher training was provided to all claims assistants and VSRs. Weekly training is held on scheduled topics and errors identified in quality reviews.

A policy outlining the use of COVERS, VBA's system to control and track claims folders, was also implemented in November. This policy requires claims folders to be "COVERed" every Monday and also requires supervisors to perform weekly spot checks.

Systematic Analyses of Operations (SAOs) are now completed accurately and timely. A tracking mechanism is in place to monitor the status of required SAOs and training on SAO writing techniques was provided.

The VSC has also taken action to more efficiently safeguard Veterans personally identifiable information. All employees received training from the Records Management Officer in August 2009 on the proper safeguard and destruction of materials. Inspections of workstations and common areas are performed regularly. Two new electronic date stamps, with locking devices, are now in secure locations.

In September 2009, the Triage Workflow Plan was implemented to include a mail routing guide to ensure VSC staff properly control and process the mail. The Triage Coach provides the VSCM with a monthly summary of all mail actions as well as any required follow-up actions. Triage training is conducted every Thursday to ensure the workflow plan is being properly implemented.

An Inquiry Routing and Information System (IRIS) Quality Review Policy was implemented in November 2009 to improve quality assurance reviews. The IRIS system is the electronic method Veterans use to communicate with VA. The Public Contact supervisor reviews a minimum of five IRIS responses per employee every month. The supervisor also discusses errors during weekly training sessions with individual employees to ensure the highest level of quality and accuracy is maintained.

To ensure Congressional inquiries are processed in a timely and accurate manner, a new policy for handling Congressional correspondence was implemented in November 2009. The Public Contact Team maintains a log of all Congressional correspondence where inquiries are annotated within one day and assigned to an employee to review and complete. The individual receiving the assignment has two working days to present a response for approval by the VSCM. Our goal is to complete Congressional inquiries within five days.

The Anchorage RO reports the results of internal brokering to VBA leadership monthly. The Western Area Office is informed monthly of any transfers of work. Brokering claims, or sending claims to another RO, is done to provide better service to our Veterans. Brokering is a short-term strategy to assist ROs with workflow challenges.

VA Office of Inspector General Report

The VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) conducted a review of the Anchorage RO from July 28, 2009 to August 6, 2009. The five areas examined were disability claims processing, data integrity, management controls, information security, and public contact. The OIG report recommended 12 areas of improvement. Action has been taken to correct the deficiencies identified by the OIG.

The Western Area Director and staff conducted an on-site review of the Anchorage RO from January 6, 2010 to January 7, 2010. A major part of this visit was to evaluate compliance with the OIG's recommendations. All action plans implemented in response to the OIG's recommendations were reviewed for compliance and effectiveness. The Western Area Director found the Anchorage RO had implemented the required actions to be fully compliant with all 12 of the OIG recommendations.

Conclusion

VA leadership and the employees of the Anchorage RO are committed to ensuring the best possible service is provided to Alaska Veterans and their families. Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I greatly appreciate being here today and look forward to answering your questions.