

Willie C. Clark, Western Area Director, Veterans Benefits Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs

Statement of
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Department of Veterans Affairs
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Senator Akaka, it is my pleasure to be here today on behalf of the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) to discuss our efforts to meet the needs of our Pacific Island Veterans. Today, I will provide an overview of the benefits and services administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Honolulu Regional Office (RO). I am accompanied by Tracey Betts, Director of the Honolulu RO.

Honolulu Regional Office

The Honolulu RO is responsible for administering VA benefits and services to Veterans residing in the Pacific Region, including Hawaii, Guam, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. In addition to providing extensive outreach to Veterans, their dependents, and survivors in our community, the Honolulu RO provides disability compensation, vocational rehabilitation and employment benefits, and loan guaranty benefits. In fiscal year (FY) 2011, the Honolulu RO provided more than \$21.8 million monthly to over 21,000 Veterans and their dependents. Over 4,500 Veterans received decisions on their disability compensation claims last year.

Outreach

The Honolulu RO serves over 129,000 Veterans in the Pacific. Through aggressive outreach, the Honolulu RO participated in over 84 outreach events in FY 2011, reaching more than 7,000 Veterans and their dependents. RO employees also participated in 120 Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and 91 Disabled TAP briefings in partnership with the Department of Labor and the Department of Defense. In addition, the Honolulu RO conducted 28 inter-island outreach events to the Veterans residing on the outer islands of Kauai, Maui, Molokai, Lanai, and Hawaii. The Honolulu RO's Homeless Coordinator is very active in outreaching to Veterans in need, and regularly visits homeless shelters. Since October 1, 2011, the Homeless Coordinator interviewed over 78 Veterans and participated in various homeless outreach events across the state, including the homeless kick-off events held in October 2011 on Kauai and Oahu.

During FY 2011, the Honolulu RO expanded the use of the Hawaii National Guard Distance Learning Centers to provide access to the Board of Veterans' Appeals (BVA) via their video teleconferencing equipment on the outer islands of Maui, Hilo, and Guam. Since it may be cost prohibitive for Veterans to travel to Oahu for a BVA hearing, this new service provides more timely access to our Veterans on the outer islands.

Hawaii also has a large population of Servicemembers, as it hosts the Air Force, Coast Guard, Army, Navy, and Marine Corps facilities. On December 31, 2010, in collaboration with each of the military services, the Honolulu RO began participation in the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES). The goal of the IDES program is to increase the transparency between the military medical evaluation board and expedite VA claims process for separating wounded, ill, and injured Servicemembers. The program has been well received by Servicemembers. One of the VA Military Service Coordinators (MSCs) is now co-located with the Physical Evaluation Board Liaison Officers (PEBLOs) at Tripler Army Medical Center, which strengthens the relationship between the MSC and PEBLOs.

Disability Compensation

VBA has developed and is beginning implementation of its Transformation Plan, a series of tightly integrated people, process, and technology initiatives designed to improve Veterans' access, eliminate the claims backlog, and achieve our goal of processing all claims within 125 days with 98 percent accuracy in 2015. We are confident that we are on the right path to deliver more timely and accurate benefits decisions to our Nation's Veterans.

The Honolulu RO recently established a quality review team (QRT), one of the initial transformation initiatives being implemented nationwide. This dedicated team of local quality review specialists evaluates station quality and individual employee performance, and performs in-process reviews to eliminate errors at the earliest possible stage in the claims process. The QRTs are comprised of personnel trained by VBA's national quality assurance staff (Statistical Technical Accuracy Review or STAR staff) to ensure local reviews are conducted according to STAR standards. This benefits our Veterans by improving consistency and accuracy in our entitlement determinations.

The Simplified Rating Decision and Notice transformation initiative was implemented beginning in January 2012. The new decision notification process streamlines and standardizes the communication of claims decisions. In most cases, Veterans now receive one simplified notification letter in which the substance of the decision, including a summary of the evidence considered and the reason for the decision, are all rendered in a single document. Testing of this initiative at the St. Paul Regional Office resulted in productivity increases of 31 percent, while sustaining a 90-percent accuracy rate, and a reduction of 14 days in average processing time. This initiative will result in meaningful improvements in the services we provide to Veterans in the Pacific Region.

To further assist in reducing the claims backlog, the Honolulu RO is sending disability compensation cases to a contract provider under a national one-year contract for claims development. The contractor helps VBA develop initial claims for compensation and pension benefits, claims for increased compensation for established service-connected conditions, and claims for additional benefits for Veterans with dependents. This contract is a temporary measure to improve timeliness of claims processing by reducing the development backlog, increase eBenefits enrollment, and allow VBA to reduce the growing inventory of claims. The contractor is also helping us find better business processes as they assist with development.

Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Activities

The Honolulu RO's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Division works closely with military facilities in Hawaii to ensure that outreach is extended to as many returning Servicemembers as possible. The VR&E Division has Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors out-based in Hilo, Maui, and Guam. Counselors also spend time in the Wounded Warrior Battalions located at Schofield Barracks and Kaneohe Marine Corp Base. They provide monthly briefings to these soldiers in addition to providing them educational and employment counseling.

The Honolulu RO VR&E Division also works in concert with the State Department of Labor, other Federal agencies, local academic institutions, and community-based organizations to promote Veterans' employment. The Honolulu RO recently renewed its memorandum of agreement with the Department of Labor Veterans' Employment and Training Service and the State of Hawaii Department of Labor and Industrial Relations Workforce Division. The memorandum of agreement reaffirms the commitment of VA's VR&E Program, the Department of Labor, and the State of Hawaii's Department of Labor to the successful readjustment of disabled Veterans from active military service to civilian employment. In addition, the Honolulu RO's employment coordinator actively participates in job fairs across the state and most recently participated in the Hiring Heroes job fair sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce. The Honolulu RO actively hires Veterans through the VR&E program. Of our 16 new hires last year, five were selected through the VR&E program and 15 were Veterans.

Servicemembers who are transitioning into the civilian workforce are provided with educational and vocational counseling. Over the last two years, more than 2,500 individual counseling assessments were completed under the counseling program authorized under Chapter 36 of Title 38. The Honolulu RO remains one of the most active ROs utilizing this program.

Home Loan Guaranty Services

The Honolulu RO Loan Guaranty Division remains an active entity within the community. With the decrease in the interest rate for home loans, refinancing requests have increased. VBA's Native American Direct Loan (NADL) Program is also used frequently in Hawaii. The NADL Program allows Veterans to purchase, construct, or improve a home on Native American trust land or to refinance an existing NADL Program loan. Much of the program's success is attributed to our ongoing partnership with the Department of Hawaiian Homelands. The Department of Hawaiian Homelands serves as our partner in assisting with loan packaging, appraisals, and construction-related inspections, and provides crucial communication between our staff and the Veterans we serve. In FY 2011, the Honolulu Loan Guaranty Division closed 30 NADL loans with a portfolio of \$12.2 million.

Conclusion

The Honolulu RO remains committed to providing the best service possible to Veterans who reside in the Pacific Region. As we implement VBA's Transformation Plan initiatives, we are excited about the opportunities these new initiatives provide to enhance the delivery of benefits and services to our Veterans and their families in Hawaii. We also continue to look for ways to improve our outreach and partnerships in the Pacific region in order to provide timely, accurate, and comprehensive information and assistance to all those we serve.

This concludes my testimony, and I look forward to answering your questions.