

MICHAEL F. SWEENEY, MASSACHUSETTS VETERANS' SERVICE OFFICERS  
ASSOCIATION

STATEMENT OF MICHAEL F. SWEENEY  
MASSACHUSETTS VETERANS' SERVICE OFFICERS ASSOCIATION BEFORE THE  
SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS December 12, 2011

Chairman Murray, Ranking Member Burr, Distinguished Members of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs:

For the record, my name is Mike Sweeney and I'm the Director of veterans services for the city of Lynn and president of the Massachusetts Veterans' Service Officers Association. The MVSOA proudly represents local Veterans Service Officers and Agents in Massachusetts and we are tasked under state law with providing critical services to those who have worn the uniform and their loved ones.

So, on behalf of the MVSOA I thank you for holding this important hearing and for giving me the opportunity to explain to the committee how we administer veterans benefits and services in the commonwealth. I'd also like to share with you some lessons learned which we hope might inform any decision you make on how best to address the continuing VA claims backlog.

For those who may not be aware of what a local veterans service officer does in the commonwealth, you should know that Massachusetts has the most comprehensive program for veterans' services in the country and local Veterans Service Officers and Agents are at the heart of it. Local VSOs work for their city or town government or, in some cases, veterans' services district and provide assistance and information to veterans and their families in the community. Every veteran in the Commonwealth has a VSO representing them at the local level and, in fact, state law requires that communities over 12,000 people hire a full-time VSO.

With so many veterans facing profound challenges in the worst economy in a generation, the local VSO has become more important than ever.

Veteran service officers work on the front lines, providing a number of services at the local level. These services range from emergency aid to veterans and their families through what is commonly referred to as the Chapter 115 Program, to assistance with VA disability claims and enrollment in VA the Health Care system. VSOs also provide assistance in accessing other state and federal benefits, including burial benefits, social security claims, military records, annuity claims, local tax abatements and even veteran license plates.

Just last year alone, local veterans service officers provided over 40 million dollars in direct aid to veterans and their families through the chapter 115 program and tens of millions more in Federal benefits through assistance with VA Disability Claims. It is important to note that the 40 million dollars in chapter 115 benefits are, in fact, reimbursed by the commonwealth at a rate of seventy five percent to the paying community.

As you can see, VSOs work with a myriad of agencies, including VA, to provide the kind of help that allows veterans and their families in Massachusetts to live with the dignity they have earned through their brave service. Not surprisingly, we believe it should be a model followed by other states.

Our experience has taught us many things in terms of how best to deliver these important services to veterans and their families. One simple, yet important lesson we have learned is that for VSOs to do their jobs, adequate staffing is key. There is simply no substitute for it and we believe this lesson can be applied to the issue of the VA disability claim backlog.

That is why, while the MVSOA genuinely applauds VA's efforts to modernize the Disability claim system and decrease the claims backlog. We would argue that VA's stated timeline to eliminate the backlog, 2015, is simply not good enough. It seems clear that an increase in trained staff to process claims is the single best way to bring this backlog down sooner rather than later. While any improvements would clearly be welcome to the men and women we serve, a three year timeline is simply not ambitious enough for America's veterans and their families. Our experience tells us that the brave men and women and their families who are part of this backlog often do not have the luxury of waiting three years for VA to fix the problem.

Three years is not good enough for the returning veteran who might become discouraged by the bureaucracy and never again try to access the VA'S critical services, as was the case with far too many Vietnam Veterans. And three years is certainly not good enough for the almost 800 World War Two veterans who die every day, many while awaiting an answer on benefits.

It is with this in mind that the MVSOA respectfully submits that any serious effort to decrease this backlog must be accompanied by the appropriate level of resources to get the job done. Staffing has clearly increased over the last few years, however it has yet not met the need. If it did, the backlog we are talking about here today would not exist.

Please understand that our collective sense of urgency is based on our member's firsthand experiences in our offices around the Commonwealth. Far too often, we see men and women who find themselves waiting for this backlog to clear in order to access benefits for which they are entitled. These veterans have served in every war and every era and suffer from injuries seen and unseen. All they are asking for in return is for their claims to be decided in a timely manner. We believe this is not too much to ask.

We understand that this request is not easy, especially considering the reality of our Nation's budget crisis. However, this is the challenge we are presented with and we do not have the ability to wish it away.

Every generation has seen our military answer the call and do what is needed. So, in closing let me ask the Committee to work to do what is needed and meet this urgent need now, not in three years.

I would like to again thank the committee and in particular, Senator Brown for making this

hearing a reality so those of us here today might provide some insight into what must be done to address this important issue.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my formal testimony and I am available for any questions which you may have.

Thank you.