

Cheryl Heald, Regional Service Officer, Montana Veterans Affairs Division

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Ms. Cheryl Heald, Regional Veterans Service Officer (Billings Office), Montana Veterans Affairs Division

Senator Tester and distinguished guests, my name is Cheryl Heald; and I am representing the State of Montana's Veterans Affairs Division and its administrator, Mr. Joe Foster. The division manages two programs – the state veterans cemetery program, of which there are three in the state and located in Miles City, Missoula and near Helena at Fort Harrison. The other, and larger program, is the division's veterans services program, which is comprised of 10 veterans service offices located throughout the state, with a total staffing of 21 accredited and certified veterans service officers. As one of the division's three Regional Veterans Service Officers, I supervise the Billings, Miles City and Belgrade veterans service offices.

The predominate service our veterans service officers provide is the preparation and submission of veteran claim products, which are sent to the VA's Regional Office located at Fort Harrison. This division is responsible for over 70% of the claim products worked at the Regional Office; the majority of which are disability claims for medical conditions resultant – either directly or indirectly – of the veteran's military service. This is accomplished through a comprehensive outreach program, whereby each veterans service office conducts outreach to communities located in its geographical area of coverage responsibility. Dependent upon veteran demographics and known need, the division conducts outreach to approximately 45 communities besides where we are located; along with State of Montana institutions such as the two state veterans homes, the prison system, and the two WatCH programs for repeat DUI offenders. Of significance to the veterans and the federal VA's healthcare system, the disability compensation claim services we provide ultimately result in VA medical services for our clients.

Regarding federal VA services to rural Montana veterans, I will speak to one issue; which happens to be the most fundamental – be regarding healthcare or benefit claims services. That issue is telephone contact with federal VA facilities in Montana; and I must add – preferably, contact with a person – whether it is to attain information, report an issue, or request services. Federal VA facilities – be it a community-based outreach clinic, the VA hospital at Fort Harrison, or the Regional Office at Fort Harrison – do not advertize their telephone numbers in the phone books or on-line, if a veteran or veteran family member were to use the internet. This is a significant disservice to rural and urban veterans alike; and, remarkably, the deficiencies in personal contact continually gets worse – not better; despite a very large and loud chorus of frustration over a long period of time. The VA's consistent answer and investment of resources is “centralization”; not only regarding veteran contact methodology; but also, other aspects of veterans services.

The information fix is simple, in our opinion. The VA should list their healthcare and veterans services facilities' telephone numbers in the government portion of telephone books – specific to our state and the communities the telephone book serves; rather than the listing of “800”

numbers that veterans are directed . Also, the VA's website should provide the state-specific contact information. While some "800" numbers are appropriate – for instance, regarding home mortgage and education benefits – the most frequently needed – veteran medical facility and claim services . . . are proven ineffective, inefficient and extremely frustrating for our veterans and their family members.

This concludes my testimony, and I thank you for the opportunity.