

Mr. Ronald Aument, VA Deputy Undersecretary for Benefits

Statement of

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Department of Veterans Affairs

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Senator Barack Obama and Congressman Luis Gutierrez

July 6, 2005

[Mr. Obama and Mr. Gutierrez, thank you for the opportunity to talk with you today about a critical benefit for veterans - disability compensation.]

This morning I will discuss the issue of pay disparities for disability compensation benefits and the ongoing initiatives of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to ensure consistency in disability rating decisions. I will also provide an overview of our efforts to support returning service members and their families.

Review of State Variances in VA Disability Compensation Payments

Consistency in disability evaluations and payments to veterans has become a very visible concern in recent months. When the issue of consistency was first raised, the Secretary asked the Inspector General (IG) to review and evaluate the factors that contribute to state variances in VA disability compensation payments.

The IG published its review report on May 19, 2005, citing a number of complex and intervening factors that influence variances in disability compensation payments. Several recommendations were included to address the variance in disability compensation payments. VBA concurs in the recommendations and has efforts underway to implement them.

Improvements Underway at the Chicago Regional Office

Considerable attention has been focused on the Chicago Regional Office's low average annual disability compensation payment per veteran. However, when measured on an annual basis, average payments to veterans in Illinois increased, development of a pilot *effort* to provide itinerant outreach services to veterans at IDVA's offices in Springfield. This *effort* will enable us to provide increased direct service to veterans in that part of the state.

In conjunction with the pilot, the Chicago RO will provide training to representatives from local service organization posts who assist veterans with benefit claims. The goal is to increase the knowledge of these community-based representatives who are widely dispersed throughout the state so they can be more effective in their outreach and assistance *efforts*.

Achieving Consistency Across VBA

Quality and consistency are goals that have been at the center of VBA's efforts for the past three years. Achieving consistency and quality in our regional office operations ensures veterans in every state receive the benefits and service they have earned. Critical to our success is our standardized work management model for claims processing. Under the Claims Processing Improvement Model, veterans service center employees in every regional office are aligned into specialized teams designed to expedite claims processing, increase the quality of decision making, and ensure staff expertise.

Training, both for new employees and to raise the skill levels of the more experienced staff; is obviously key to consistency in our rating decisions. VBA deployed new training tools and centralized training programs that support greater consistency. Training materials and satellite broadcasts on the proper approach to

rating complex issues have been provided to every field station. Regulations that contain the Schedule for Rating Disabilities have been revised to eliminate ambiguous rating criteria and replace them with objective rating criteria wherever possible.

Accuracy is monitored through VBA's Systematic Technical Accuracy Review (STAR) - a centralized program that measures national accuracy using statistically valid sampling. STAR findings are distributed to field stations and shared with training staff for incorporation into computer-based training modules, and other training tools.

Regional office operations are monitored continually to identify areas where quality improvements can be made and processing efficiencies can be realized. Site visits are conducted on a regular basis to assess station management, operating performance, training, and workload management. Training is provided by the site visit team as needed.

OIF/OEF Veterans

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We have implemented case management procedures for seriously disabled

service members of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) to ease their transition to veteran status and ensure the coordinated delivery of benefits and services. Every regional office and medical center has a designated OEF/OIF coordinator who reaches out to and communicates with injured service members, and ensures their health needs are met and their benefit claims are processed expeditiously.

Conclusion

VA strives to honor each new veteran and their family with compassion and dignity. Our challenge is to ensure that all regional offices are generating

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consistently accurate and timely decisions that provide the maximum benefits to , which veterans are entitled.

[This completes my statement, and I will be happy to answer any questions you might have.]