

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

Review of Veterans' Disability Compensation: Undue Delay in Claims Processing

Good morning. I am pleased that you can join us for the fourth in our series of hearings to review veterans' disability compensation. Today's hearing will examine what can be done to mitigate the undue delay in claims processing.

The Veterans Benefits Administration's workload will continue to increase in the coming years. Two factors make this true: aging veterans who have conditions made worse by their advancing age and newer veterans returning disabled from Iraq and Afghanistan. The time necessary to process a disability claim continues to be a matter of concern to veterans and to this Committee.

While VBA's goal is to process a disability claim within 125 days, they remain woefully short of that goal - with most claims completed within 185 days - fully two months beyond their goal. That is two months of waiting in limbo for a benefit that was earned through selfless service to this nation.

There is some gratifying news. For the first time in recent memory, VBA is now processing more claims than it receives. But as I have said many times, timeliness cannot take precedent over accuracy - these two components go hand-in-hand. In recent months, accuracy has declined. I know that accuracy diminishes, in part, from the increase in new hires that must learn the ropes. I am confident that VBA takes this issue seriously and is attempting to alleviate the decline.

Over the last several years, Congress has taken affirmative steps to ensure adequate staffing for claims processing. At the beginning of Fiscal Year 2007, the Compensation and Pension Service had more than 8,000 staffers, with a goal of hiring more than 2,000 more by the end of Fiscal Year 2008. As of last week, VBA had just 290 more full-time employees to hire in order to reach its goal. VBA's hiring process has proven to be effective and timely. I am hopeful that this increase in staffing will put VBA further on the road to reducing its inventory of rating claims.

However, the increase in staffing is not enough to solve the many issues that VBA faces in adjudicating claims. It is my hope that the groups we have assembled today will begin an open dialogue with this Committee on what more should be done to improve claims processing.

Staffing is not the only answer. Greater reliance on technology, increased training initiatives and an enhanced adjudication process are possible components of an improved system. There will be no silver bullet - no quick fix. But this is one area where the Committee must continue to provide oversight and assistance.