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Legion: Change VA claims process, not priorities

The American Legion opposes any plan that would give some wartime veterans priority over others in filing claims for VA benefits

WASHINGTON (March 27, 2013) -- The debate over the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) disability claims backlog has been raging the past few weeks in the media, partially sparked by comments made by speakers at The American Legion's Washington Conference last month.

On March 24, VA Secretary Eric Shinseki gave his first television interview in four years on CNN's "State of the Union" program. That same day, the Legion executive director in Washington, Peter Gaytan, weighed in on the same show, which focused on the claims backlog.

Gaytan told CNN host Candy Crowley that the Legion is working with VA to fix the claims process, and that the crux of the problem is inconsistent performance of VA regional offices in adjudicating claims. Once the problems at those regional offices are addressed, the backlog should be reduced substantially, Gaytan said.

In 2010, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) had about 509,000 claims pending with 39 percent in backlog (pending more than 125 days). Currently, VBA's figures show about 900,000 claims pending with more than 70 percent in backlog.

James E. Koutz, the Legion's national commander, said, "We don't need a presidential commission to figure out how to solve the backlog. "Adding another layer of bureaucracy won't get benefits to our veterans any faster."

Koutz also challenged the idea of prioritizing claims applications on the basis of war era. "Not only does prioritization based on war era violate federal law, it imposes value judgments on the wartime service of veterans. Do we really want to make that kind of call? Is this something that would help to simplify the claims process? We need to honor the service of all veterans by giving them all fair and timely access to the benefits they are due under the law."

On March 20, The American Legion submitted a statement for the record to Congress that included three specific recommendations for reducing the claims backlog:

- Fix a broken work-credit system for VA employees, which currently gives the same credit for work, whether it is correct or incorrect.
- Develop a system to aggregate common errors made in claims processing, and use the information to create a training plan for employees.
- Hire more veterans to process claims, in order to increase understanding of the military among those who are interpreting claims files.

The American Legion has more than 2,500 accredited claims representatives nationwide who assist veterans in filing their VA disability claims. It also has more than a dozen full-time employees who help veterans appeal claims that have been denied by VA.

Veterans with Apple or Android smart phones can download The American Legion's Claims Coach app at www.legion.org to find the nearest Legion service officer, who can assist with filing a VA claim.

Media contacts: Marty Callaghan: 202-263-5758/202-215-8644, mcallaghan@legion.org or Craig Roberts: 202-263-2982/202-406-0887, croberts@legion.org. A high resolution photo of Nat. Cmdr. Koutz is available at www.legion.org.

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