



**Department of
Veterans Affairs**

Office of Public Affairs
Media Relations

Washington, DC 20420
(202) 461-7600
www.va.gov

News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
August 9, 2013

VA Partners with American Bar Association and Legal Services Corporation to Launch a Pilot Program to Help Veterans Receive Decisions Faster and Reduce Claims Backlog

Pro-Bono Pilot Program to Assist Veterans with Developing their Disability Claims

WASHINGTON – The Department of Veterans Affairs, the American Bar Association (ABA) and the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) announced today a new partnership and pilot program aimed at reducing the claims backlog and making it easier for unrepresented Veterans to receive assistance developing their claims for disability pay.

“Ending the backlog is an ‘all hands on deck’ effort that requires teamwork, both in and out of government,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. “This partnership between VA, ABA and LSC is aimed at surging resources to deliver earned benefits to Veterans more quickly.”

In the coming months, ABA and LSC attorneys will provide free assistance to a targeted group of unrepresented Veterans who request their help gathering and obtaining evidence required by law to support their disability claims.

The development of the claim is often the longest part of the process that determines whether a Veteran is entitled to VA compensation. These steps can take more than 200 days in the rating decision process. The pilot will offer pro bono attorney assistance to Veterans with claims pending at the St. Petersburg and Chicago Regional Offices who do not currently have an authorized representative.

Veterans will choose whether to accept this pro-bono assistance. Similar Veterans with claims pending at other VA regional offices may also be considered for the pilot, if warranted.

"The ABA is proud to take the lead in connecting veterans with pro bono attorneys who will help them receive the aid our nation owes them for their selfless

courage,” said ABA President Laurel Bellows. “We hope that our initial focus on Chicago and St. Petersburg can swiftly be expanded across the nation.”

The claims selected for this pilot program, which are currently -- or will soon be -- part of the claims backlog, will vary in terms of complexity and degree of completeness. VA will accredit the attorneys who choose to participate, and the ABA and LSC will provide them with specialized training that will enable them to help evaluate and develop Veterans claims and make those claims ready for a rating decision. The two initial pilot sites were selected based on proximity to ABA headquarters, and the opportunity for the biggest impact on the backlog.

In the coming months, VA will identify eligible Veterans to participate in the pilot program and send letters advising them of all their options for representation to help them advance their claims - from Veteran Service Organizations, attorneys and claims agents, to pro bono attorneys participating in this pilot.

The VA letter will inform Veterans of a 1-800 hotline and website to connect them to an attorney who is willing to assist with their claim, free of charge.

Under the partnership, the ABA and LSC will match interested Veterans and attorneys on several factors, including geographic location, complexity of the claim and the Veteran’s and attorney’s preferences on the nature and scope of representation.

VA is continuing to implement several initiatives to meet the Department’s goal to eliminate the claims backlog in 2015. As a result of these initiatives, VA’s total claims inventory has dropped to its lowest levels since March 2011.

The number of claims in the VA backlog – claims pending more than 125 days – has been reduced by 18 percent, compared to the highest point in March 2013.

Veterans can learn more about disability benefits on the joint Department of Defense-VA web portal, *eBenefits*, at www.ebenefits.va.gov/.

#