



THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON
May 31, 2013

The Honorable Patrick Meehan
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Meehan:

Thank you for your letter expressing your concerns about Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) disability claims processing for Veterans in Pennsylvania and nationwide. In your letter, you also requested an update on the Department of Defense (DoD) and VA collaboration in facilitating the electronic transfer of military records and on the implementation of the VA Strategic Plan to Eliminate the Compensation Claims Backlog, issued on January 25, 2013.

Veterans, their family members, and Survivors have earned and deserve our very best performance, and we are committed to delivering benefits and services faster, more accurately, and with greater efficiency. We currently are not meeting the standards of service we desire, and the growing inventory of claims and lengthy delays that many of our Veterans are experiencing are unacceptable.

As you know, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) is aggressively pursuing its Transformation Plan, a series of tightly integrated people, process, and technology initiatives designed to eliminate the claims backlog, and achieve the goal of processing all claims within 125 days and with 98-percent accuracy in 2015. VBA is retraining, reorganizing, streamlining business processes, and building and implementing technology solutions based on newly redesigned processes in order to improve benefits delivery.

Key to VBA's transformation is the transition from a paper-bound claims processing environment to processing claims in a paperless environment. Fifty-one regional offices (RO) (including Philadelphia) and our Appeals Management Center have fielded the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS), giving them the software and hardware to process disability claims paperlessly. The remaining ROs will field VBMS by the end of this year. VBMS dramatically reduces the amount of paper in the current disability claims process, and employs rules-based claims development and decision recommendations utilizing rating calculators where possible. In addition, VBA will have the ability to broker claims electronically to any VA RO where VBMS is deployed, allowing fluid movement of pending work and workload balancing.

Under the Transformation Plan, VBA has reorganized every RO (including Philadelphia) to have distinct processing lanes that are established based on the complexity and priority of the claim. This new organizational model includes integrated, cross-functional teams to process claims from start to finish, which

Page 2.

The Honorable Patrick Meehan

facilitates a quick flow of completed claims that results in minimal rework and reduced processing time. All 56 ROs are now operating under this new claims processing model that better leverages employee skills and streamlines claims adjudication.

Many Veterans served by the Philadelphia RO will soon be provided decisions on their disability claims as a result of a new nationwide initiative announced by VA on April 19, 2013. Under this initiative, VBA is committed to providing Veterans with decisions before the end of June 2013 on claims that have been pending for 2 years or longer. The focus on completing the oldest claims will then immediately extend to those pending over one year. VA claims raters will make provisional decisions on the oldest claims in inventory, which will allow Veterans to begin collecting compensation benefits more quickly, if eligible. When all evidence is of record or can be quickly obtained, Veterans will receive a standard rating decision with appeal rights. However, when all evidence is not yet of record, this initiative will provide Veterans with provisional decisions on all claimed issues based on the evidence that is available. If a VA medical examination is needed to decide the claim, it will be ordered and expedited prior to issuance of the provisional decision. Veterans will be able to submit additional evidence for consideration a full year after the provisional rating, before VA issues a final decision.

It is important to understand that as a result of this initiative, metrics used to track benefits claims will experience significant fluctuations. As we complete the oldest claims, the measure of the average length of time to complete a claim will rise significantly in the near term. However, the average age of the claims in the inventory will decrease since the oldest claims will no longer be part of the inventory.

Collaborative efforts are ongoing with DoD to allow VA to receive complete service records and to receive them electronically for faster and more efficient procurement. On December 6, 2012, VBA reached an agreement with DoD requiring the military services to certify a Servicemember's service treatment records (STR) as complete as possible at the point of transfer to VA. Effective January 1, 2013, all five military services began full implementation of STR certification. The final medical treatment facility at each military service, including the National Guard and Reserves, will certify the completeness of all paper STRs at the point of separation from military service, eliminating the need for unnecessary additional development.

VA and DoD are committed to eliminating the exchange of paper records altogether. The Armed Forces Health Longitudinal Technology Application (AHLTA) print-to-portable document format pilot will begin in September to provide VA electronic data of information contained in AHLTA. DoD will deploy the Healthcare Artifact and Image Management Solution (HAIMS) to provide a mechanism for scanning and

Page 3.

The Honorable Patrick Meehan

uploading paper documents to make them available to VA. Additionally, the technology could also be used to scan and upload paper medical record items received from private-sector providers. DoD has initiated an accelerated deployment schedule for HAIMS with a goal of stopping the flow of paper STRs to VA by December 2013.

DoD and VA currently collaborate in enrolling separating Servicemembers in the VA health care system. During their mandatory separation briefings, Servicemembers receive assistance in completing the necessary VA enrollment forms. Those Servicemembers returning from combat zones are introduced to VA during the out-processing period at demobilization sites, and receive a standard 45-minute briefing on VA benefits and services, during which, they are encouraged to enroll in VA health care.

The Philadelphia RO invites you and your staff to attend annual Congressional roundtable meetings hosted at the RO, so that you may have a better understanding of the RO's workload and progress. The next meeting is scheduled for early summer, and your office will receive a written invitation shortly. If you have additional questions or desire more information, please have your staff contact Mr. John Kruse, Director, Benefits Legislative Service, at (202) 461-6467 or John.Kruse3@va.gov.

Thank you for your continued support of our mission.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Eric K. Shinseki", with a long, sweeping flourish extending downwards and to the right.

Eric K. Shinseki