

PATRICK MEEHAN
7TH DISTRICT, PENNSYLVANIA



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MARITIME TRANSPORTATION

April 10, 2013

The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Shinseki,

I am writing concerning the continued backlog of processing veterans' disability claims. Recently, you said that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has a "robust plan" to eliminate the backlog by 2015. With veterans currently waiting an average of 273 days for decisions on their claims, I am writing to request an update on the implementation of the Department of Veterans Affairs Strategic Plan to Eliminate the Compensation Claims Backlog, issued on January 25, 2013.

VA disability benefits ensure that those wounded in battle are cared for, including the loss of earnings potential based on those injuries. Taken from President Abraham Lincoln, the VA motto is "To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and orphan." As of this month, however, there are close to 900,000 pending disability claims at the VA, and more than 630,000, or 70.5 percent of those are backlogged.

Following decades of promises and billions of dollars of taxpayer investment, instead of being closer to providing quality care to our heroes, we are further away. At the Philadelphia VA, veterans are waiting an average of 510.3 days for decisions on their claims. Moreover, I have been contacted by many veterans in my district who have been waiting for more two years for a decision. Sadly, more than 19,000 veterans have died while waiting for their benefits, and their families waited on average an additional 282 days for compensation. These backlogs are not new and were identified at the start of the Administration. Yet in the last four years, the wait-times have grown 2,000 percent. This is unacceptable and tragic.

I appreciate the challenges the VA faces in providing the best care to our veterans. That is why in the past four years, the VA has received a 40 percent funding increase to ensure we are keeping our promises to Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. I also recognize that our paper-based records system can only add to processing delays. To overcome this, taxpayers have spent \$537 million on a four-year plan to transition health records from paper to electronic. But today, 97 percent of claims are still on paper.

I am seeking an update on the implementation of this plan, as well as the VA's plan to coordinate health records with the Department of Defense, so our veterans can have confidence that this problem will be fixed once and for all. When our nation called them to serve, America's veterans did not hesitate. We owe our veterans care, not red tape.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Patrick Meehan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Patrick Meehan
Member of Congress