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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

“Body-count” processing must end at VA

National Commander calls for urgent changes in claims system.

WASHINGTON (June 22, 2009) – An immediate overhaul of the Department of Veterans Affairs disability claims processing system is the only way out of a fast-growing nationwide backlog of unresolved cases, American Legion National Commander David K. Rehbein said after a congressional hearing last Thursday evening.

“As the backlog of claims approaches 1 million, and the needs of deserving veterans go unmet, VA can wait no longer to institute new and workable policies and procedures,” the leader of the nation’s largest veterans service organization said following a House Veterans Affairs subcommittee session on the problem.

Lawmakers heard compelling testimony from American Legion member David Bohan, a Gulf War Army combat veteran from Oregon who suffered service-connected permanent damage to his left foot as well as post-traumatic stress disorder. His disability claim is one of hundreds of thousands caught up in the VA backlog. Bohan’s story is among those highlighted in an extensive, three-part series of articles that debuted in the June issue of The American Legion Magazine.

The scope of the VA claims backlog problem and some potential solutions were detailed to subcommittee members by Ian dePlanque, assistant director of The American Legion’s Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Commission.

The VA’s so-called work-credit system, which awards a claims processor credit in “body-count” fashion for completion of a job even if errors occur, was criticized by The American Legion representative. “To count work credit the same whether it is performed properly, or whether details are overlooked encourages corners to be cut,” dePlanque said. “In the past, it has been proposed that VA count work credit when a claim reaches a final decision. In that manner, the encouragement will be to perform every aspect of the claim correctly, as appeals over missed technical details will only hamper the process and create lengthy delays in the claims process.”

The American Legion has long recognized understaffing and poor staff retention as factors contributing to the VA’s claims backlog, especially in light of an ever increasing number of claimants. The Legion representative’s remarks reiterated this point, and also questioned the quality of claims processors.

“The American Legion national staff has interviewed regional office employees during quality review visits,” said dePlanque, “with the consistent complaints among regional office employees being: inadequate staffing levels, inadequate continuing education, and pressure

to make quick decisions, (resulting) in an overall decrease in quality of work. It is an extreme disservice to veterans, not to mention unrealistic, to expect VA to continue to process an ever-increasing workload while maintaining quality and timeliness, with the current staff levels,” he said. “The current wartime situation provides an excellent opportunity for VA to actively seek out returning veterans from Operations Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, especially those with service-connected disabilities, for employment opportunities within the Veterans Benefits Administration.”

The American Legion reasons that employment of veterans with recent military experience would increase the speed and accuracy of processing claims because veterans would have greater understanding of military terminology and the circumstances of a claim. They would also help minimize what is termed “over-development” of claims “when the simple facts to grant (the claim) are already present ... needless exams and searches for extra records continue to drag out the process,” dePlanque testified.

Commander Rehbein echoed his staff’s criticism of some of the VBA’s practices but reiterated American Legion support for the critical challenges VA faces with a fast growing new generation of war veterans entering the system. “By offering our suggestions for improvement, as well as our critique, we strive to work hand-in-hand with VA – as we have for decades – to improve the quality of life of some of our most worthy citizens, our military veterans.”

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