FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Miller faults VBA ‘retaliatory’ tactics vs. Legion

House Veterans Affairs chairman lodges complaint in letter to VA Secretary Shinseki

WASHINGTON (Feb. 19, 2014) -- Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., pulled no punches in a Feb. 14 letter sent to Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary Eric Shinseki. He accused the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) of obstructing the work of an American Legion team of experts during its recent visit to the Seattle VA Regional Office.

The Jan. 21-24 visit was part of the Legion’s Regional Office Action Review (ROAR) program, which has been evaluating claims processing at VAROs nationwide and offering recommendations for improvement.

Miller, chairman of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs (HCVA), wrote that VBA’s recent actions “are perceived as deliberate and retaliatory, and I caution that any obstruction to external review of VBA’s work product is contrary to both transparency and government accountability; it will not be tolerated under a pretense of workload management.

“Moreover, actions taken to frustrate the reviews of The American Legion are hostile to both the mission of the (VA) and the interests of our Nation’s veterans.”

Effective immediately, Miller is assigning HCVA staff members to accompany Legion ROAR teams and report on their visits to VA regional offices.

Miller noted that VBA allegedly “obstructed the Legion’s ROAR efforts” in Seattle and “limited the Legion’s ability to fruitfully conduct its visit, converse with claims processing staff, and thoroughly review disability benefits claims in accordance with its long-standing practice.”

Verna Jones, director of The American Legion’s Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Division, said that, until recently, relations between VA and the Legion have been essentially positive. “As an organization that helps veterans and their families every day, we place great value upon our relationship with VA. Are we always going to agree on things such as the accuracy of claims processing? No. Does that mean we should stop working together for the good of our veterans? Of course not.”

Jones alluded to Legion testimony at a Dec. 4, 2013, congressional hearing that contradicted VA’s published figures of 90-plus percent for its degree of accuracy in processing disability claims for veterans. The Legion testified that its own accuracy figures compiled from ROAR reviews were substantially lower.

Miller mentioned the Legion’s testimony in his letter to Shinseki, indicating that “VA’s accuracy statistics are not consistent with the Legion’s review of recently adjudicated claims; in the past year, 55 percent of claims reviewed by the Legion were identified as having errors....”
Jones said The American Legion remains committed to helping VA improve its system for claims processing, which includes improving the performance of the Legion’s own accredited representatives who help veterans nationwide.

“It’s a learning process for both the VBA and the Legion,” Jones said. “We go to the regional offices, help identify the best practices, identify the problems, and offer recommendations on how to make the entire process even better. But we need access to the claims files, to the claims adjudicators, and we need to do our work unobstructed.”

The American Legion took a leading role in helping VA with its Fully Developed Claims program, which can dramatically cut the time it takes for a benefits claim to be processed and adjudicated. Noting that the VA claims backlog has recently gone up by about 2,000 cases, Jones said, “We know the backlog is a perennial problem, and we want to keep working with VA to bring it back down -- through our ROAR visits, through fully developed claims, whatever it takes.”

Miller wrote to Shinseki that The American Legion’s efforts are parallel to those of VA, and that “the Legion’s commitment to quality outcome is a force multiplier to what should be VA’s true goal, improving the Department’s ability to serve and honor America’s veterans.”

Currently, The American Legion is assisting more than 720,000 veterans across the country in filing their VA claims.

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