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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Legion submits solutions for VA backlog

As the number of undecided claims continues to grow, The American Legion calls for greater attention to accuracy and employing more veterans as claims processors.

WASHINGTON (March 20, 2013) -- One day after Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., called for the resignation of Allison Hickey, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) under secretary for benefits, she found herself testifying before Miller as he chaired a March 20 hearing by the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs that focused on VA's mounting backlog of disability claims.

For the hearing, The American Legion submitted a statement recognizing a substantial increase in the claims backlog since 2010, along with specific recommendations to help solve the problem. In 2010, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) had about 509,000 claims pending with 39 percent in backlog (pending more than 125 days). As of this week, VBA's figures show nearly 896,000 claims pending with more than 70 percent in backlog.

While VA has been aggressively pursuing technological initiatives to reduce the backlog, they are not the only key to the solution for reducing the backlog. The American Legion recommended three specific actions for VA to take:

- Fix a broken work-credit system for VA employees, which currently gives the same credit for work, whether it is correct or incorrect.
- Develop a system to aggregate common errors made in claims processing, and use the information to create a training plan for employees.
- Hire more veterans to process claims to increase understanding of the military among those who are interpreting claims files.

Error rates continue to be a problem among VA claims adjudicators. When an error is made processing a claim, that claim can be appealed. The lengthy appeals process means a claim that should have been decided in a few months now can take years. Appeals based on errors clog the system with work that could have been removed from the flow if the claim had been done correctly the first time.

Improving VA's work-credit system would not require a major overhaul, according to The American Legion. It could be as simple as giving credit for when a claim is finished but also applying a negative credit or debit when it is found to be in error. If an office finishes 5,000 claims but only at an 80-percent accuracy rate, for instance, the office would get credit for 4,000 claims.

By aggregating common errors made in the claims process, VA should be able to develop effective computer models of where their employees are making the most mistakes and adjust training accordingly, the Legion statement suggests.

For example, if the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims finds a consistent pattern of failure to apply proper evidence standards for post-traumatic stress disorder cases involving combat zones, then refresher training material should be developed and delivered to VA regional offices.

By hiring more veterans, VA will have more claims processors who have familiarity with

military records in claims files, according to The American Legion. Veterans don't have to spend time looking up military acronyms; they just know that "CIB" means that a servicemember has been in combat and that certain U.S. Code provisions apply to his or her case.

Another advantage to hiring more veterans at VA would be to decrease unemployment among their ranks. In recent years, veterans have seen unemployment rates that were two-thirds higher than those of non-veterans.

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