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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Legion agrees with VA: 'End this shutdown'

Secretary's testimony paints bleak picture for veterans if the impasse continues in Washington.

WASHINGTON (Oct. 9, 2013) -- Testifying as the sole witness in an Oct. 9 House hearing, Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary Eric Shinseki warned Congress that if the federal government shutdown continues, millions of America's veterans will stop receiving about $6 billion in monthly payments on Nov. 1.

Addressing the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Shinseki said that veterans service organizations such as The American Legion "have been, quite directly, helpful to me over the past four and a half years, and trying to help us understand how to be better at our responsibilities of caring for veterans, but also servicemembers and families, and survivors that we are responsible for."

Shinseki said, unequivocally, that all the effects of the shutdown on his department "are negative. It is an impediment to VA's ability to deliver services and benefits that veterans have earned through their service." Calling the lapse in federal appropriations an "avoidable situation," Shinseki said veterans across the country "will be harmed if the shutdown continues."

Daniel M. Dellinger, national commander of The American Legion, said, "We understand the process and dynamic tension. However, the American Legion urges Congress and the White House to stop holding America's veterans hostage to their political standoff. We saw several members of Congress gathered last week at the World War II Memorial in Washington. They were supporting our veterans who were being kept from visiting their own memorial. We hope those same legislators are doing everything they can to end this shutdown."

In the last six months, VA has reduced its disability claims backlog has been reduced by about 193,000 claims, Shinseki said. Yet the shutdown "directly threatens VA's ability to eliminate the backlog. We've lost ground we fought hard to take. Roughly 1,400 veterans a day are now not receiving decisions on their disability compensation claims due to the end of overtime (for claims processors).

"If the shutdown does not end in the coming weeks, VA will not be able to assure delivery of 1 November checks to more than 5.18 million beneficiaries. And that accounts about $6.25 billion in payments that people are expecting."

At a critical time for veterans, Shinseki said, everyone at VA "should be focusing on how best to accomplish their missions. And so I ask the committee and the rest of Congress to help us by resolving this fiscal impasse now, so that VA and our federal partners, on whom we have to rely to do our work, can get back to work full time."

Because of the shutdown, VA was forced to furlough nearly 10,000 employees on Oct. 7 and

suspend mandatory overtime for disability claims processors (who had been working at least 20 hours of mandatory overtime per month).

VA has said that such overtime by claims processors has been instrumental in helping to reduce the claims backlog, which has dropped from about 611,000 claims last March to about 418,500 at the end of September, according to VA.

Funding for veterans benefits will become exhausted within two weeks, VA reports. At that point, claims processing for compensation, pension, education, vocational rehabilitation, and employment benefits would be suspended. Benefits payments would also be halted for disabled veterans, their surviving spouses and eligible children. Tuition and stipends for hundreds of thousands of veterans and servicemembers would also be suspended.

"On 1 November, I will not be able to pay all these beneficiaries who are expecting those checks," Shinseki said. "I need the authorization, appropriations and a budget to be able to do that. I don't do that independently.

"What is best for veterans, and for all of us right now, is a budget for the entire federal government. Let us get back to work. The sooner we do it, the faster I get back up to full speed."

Referring to the hearing, Dellinger said, "VA Secretary Shinseki gave Congress many grim details today about how the government shutdown is affecting our veterans, including the fact that millions of our nation's veterans may not be receiving about $6 billion in benefits next month. The VA claims backlog has started to go up again. Our student veterans would also stop getting GI Bill education benefits.

"The secretary told Congress this is a critical time for veterans and that he can't solve this dilemma independently. We agree with the secretary and urge Congress and the White House to act immediately to either end this shutdown or fund the accounts that ensure the well-being of so many of our veterans."

Other programs for veterans affected by the shutdown include the Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service that supports employment and counseling services for veterans. The Small Business Administration has closed 10 Veterans Business Outreach Centers nationwide, and has suspended all of its programs for veterans business development and service-disabled veterans procurement.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development is no longer issuing new vouchers for homeless veterans' housing.

VA services that are continuing during the shutdown include health services at more than 1,700 facilities across the country, funded by advance appropriations for fiscal 2014. The American Legion pushed for federal legislation that resulted in such funding.

The Veterans Crisis Line, which has already accounted for about 30,000 life-saving rescues, will remain open on a 24-hour basis at (800) 273-TALK (8255). VA insurance processing and home loan processing will also continue.

For more information on how the government shutdown is affecting veterans, go to www.va.gov.

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