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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Shutdown halts VA's efforts to go paperless

WASHINGTON (Oct. 9, 2013) -- The Department of Veterans Affairs progress toward a paperless records system was halted Oct. 8 when the partial federal government shutdown stopped all software development by the department. The latest negative impact on the nation's veterans prompted a strong response from American Legion National Commander Daniel Dellinger.

On Oct. 8, VA was forced to furlough more than 2,700 information technology employees, bringing a cessation of software development and halting VA's progress toward implementing its paperless Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS). Contractors no longer are allowed to develop any software patches to correct malfunctions within VA's electronic programs, which are new and have been subject to constant adjustments to make them efficient and effective.

"This is just one more example of veterans being short-changed because of the inability of Congress and the White House to do what's best for our country: reach an agreement and end the shutdown," Dellinger said. "VBMS is one of the keys to reducing the benefits claims backlog that has some veterans waiting years for benefits they earned through service to their country. The progress being made in the effort has come to a grinding halt because of this impasse. Once again, this country's veterans are caught in the middle between squabbling politicians."

The furloughing of IT employees also impacted the Stakeholders Enterprise Portal, which is software that allows veterans service officers to submit VA claims through a paperless system, reducing claims processing times; and the E-Benefits portal, which allows veterans to submit electronic claims to VA while choosing a veterans service organization to represent them.

The halting of VA's electronic efforts come at the same time that the department closed public access to all of its regional offices while furloughing more than 7,000 additional employees, which has slowed the filing of claims for veterans using veterans service officers.

VA had reduced its pending claims from 900,000 to 725,000 from January 2013 to September, but since the shutdown went into effect, 2,000 claims have been added to the backlog.

"By no means was the claims backlog solved, but it was headed in the right direction prior to the partial federal shutdown," Dellinger said. "Now we're back to adding to it, through no fault of anyone but the politicians who refuse to compromise. America's veterans, who already have sacrificed so much, are being asked to do so again. How is that fair?"

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