FROM CRISIS TO CONFIDENCE

American Legion Veterans Benefits Centers and Town Hall Meetings tackle VA issues head-on.

MAY 2015

Photo by Lucas Carter

Executive Summary

In response to a national crisis, The American Legion went to work, community to community, face to face, one veteran at a time.

Two weeks after an interim report from the VA Inspector General's Office substantiated claims that as many as 40 veterans in Arizona died waiting for medical appointments while their names languished on a secret list, The American Legion produced its first Veterans Crisis Command Center and Town Hall Meeting. Whistleblowers from across the country had stepped forward with similar accounts of secret lists, falsified records, unanswered VA claims applications and long-delayed medical appointments. It was clearly not just a Phoenix problem.

The American Legion and VA have been working together ever since to move from crisis to confidence in the health-care and benefits systems whose mission is timely, adequate care and support for those who served our nation in uniform.

Since hundreds of families filled American Legion Post 1 in Phoenix during the second week of June 2014, American Legion outreach efforts across the map have provided one-on-one help, including expert claims assistance from American Legion service officers and VA adjudicators, and many others.

These events, typically kicked off with a town hall meeting to hear veteran opinions about local VA services, have unleashed a torrent of new understanding about the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for improvement throughout the system.

In the beginning, they were called Veterans Crisis Command Centers. As a corner was being turned to improve care and service, the events were renamed Veterans Benefits Centers. Now, in places like North Carolina, these personal-outreach activities are being replicated by state American Legion service officers, working closely with VA. Different communities have demonstrated different needs, all of which are now being addressed. Millions of dollars in overdue, retroactive VA benefits have been paid to veterans on the spot at these events. Doctor appointments have been moved up. Homeless veterans have found resources to help them. Moreover, The American Legion is helping VA obtain a firsthand understanding of the real issues their patients and benefits applicants are facing.

The following pages include summaries of Veterans Crisis Command Centers, Town Hall Meetings, and Veterans' Benefits Centers as a new and improved era of care unfolds.

“It’s good to have a center like this – so we can come in and talk to someone in person.”

***Army veteran Rudy Garza**, who received American Legion help getting his cousin’s VA disability rating upgraded during the Phoenix VCCC*

NO. 1 American Legion Post 1, Phoenix

WHEN: June 9-13

WHY: Epicenter of the crisis, where a whistleblower/former VA doctor came forward in April to reveal that as many as 40 veterans had died while waiting on a secret list of unscheduled appointments in the Phoenix health-care system and that the director of the system had received a performance-based bonus.

AMERICAN LEGION SERVICES PROVIDED AT THE VCCC: Health-care system enrollment assistance, scheduling of outpatient appointments, VA benefits applications, claims and appeals representation

NUMBER OF VETERANS ASSISTED: 590

WHAT ELSE: Four veterans were granted 100-percent service-connected disability ratings on the spot, and one terminally ill veteran received a Chapter 35 benefit that will help his dependents pay for college education. Another veteran sought American Legion help and discovered he was eligible for $60,000 in retroactive disability compensation.

"We aren't going to give up until we get it fixed."

American Legion Department of Arizona Commander Judi Beischel

"It's been a wonderful partnership with The American Legion. It's important to us to hear the veterans, sit face-to-face, and answer questions and concerns that they have."

Douglas Chapman, *Winston-Salem Veterans Benefits Administration employee who partcipated in the VCCC*

NO. 2 American Legion Post 202, Fayetteville, N.C.

WHEN: June 16-20

WHY: In response to a VA audit that showed that nearly 8,100 veterans had waited 30 days or longer for medical appointments at the Fayetteville VA Medical Center

SERVICES PROVIDED: Assistance with medical appointments, VA benefits claims, grief counseling and homelessness

NUMBER OF VETERANS ASSISTED: 787

WHAT ELSE: Provided help for one homeless female veteran who had been living out of her car and another "who was pretty much on the brink of homelessness – literally," said American Legion Post 202 Adjutant Chrystalrenee Saunders. "He came and got his (claims) appeal paperwork done, they told him exactly what he needs to do, and he left here with a smile on his face. Everybody has left here real happy."

"I didn't have a lot of faith in what was going on. But someone did help me out,and I want you all to know that, in my bank account this morning was my $11,000 retro check. I can now move me and my son out of my vehicle, and I can buy my son a healthy meal."

A homeless veteran *who came to the Fayetteville VCCC looking for help from The American Legion*

“We helped one veteran who has been trying to settle his benefits claim since 1970. This was the first time he’d received any assistance.”

American Legion Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Division Director Verna Jones,
coordinator of the VCCC in El Paso

NO. 3 American Legion Post 58, El Paso, Texas

WHEN: June 23-27

WHY: Long waiting times for medical appointments, including VA audit report showing that the average appointment wait time for specialty care is 89 days, amid accusations of falsified records

SERVICES PROVIDED: Help with medical appointments, benefits claims, bereavement counseling and other forms of assistance

NUMBER OF VETERANS ASSISTED: 410

WHAT ELSE: More than $460,000 in retroactive benefits were awarded to 74 veterans on the spot

"I really, really appreciate the fact VA is here. I know it couldn't have been easy to sit here. But these people are good people. They take their jobs seriously. We're here to work with them."

American Legion Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Commission Chairman Ralph Bozella

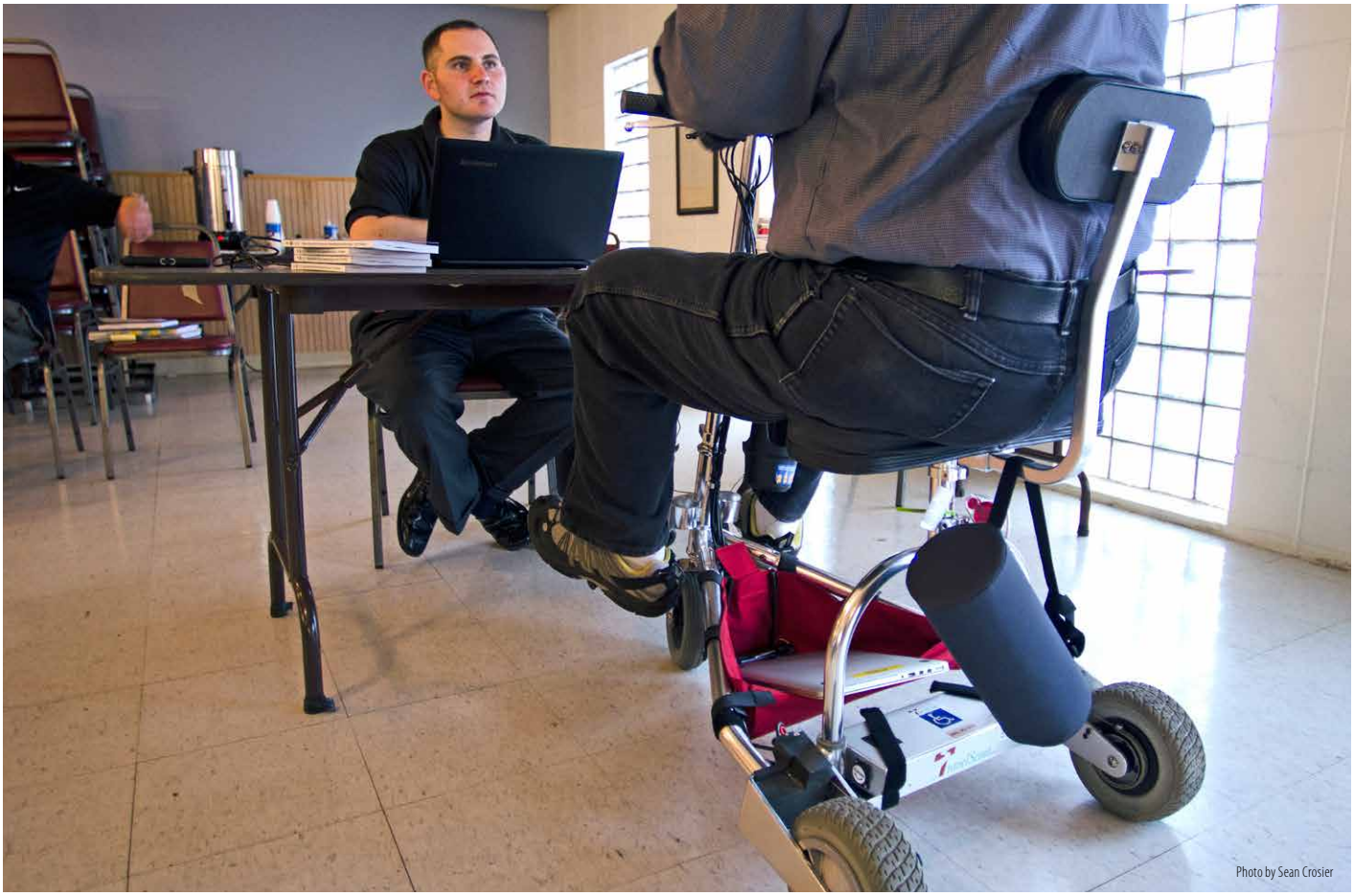


Photo by Sean Crosier

NO. 4 American Legion Post 4, Fort Collins, Colo.

WHEN: July 14-18

WHY: A VA investigation showed that many veterans of the Fort Collins community-based outpatient clinic were forced to wait months for appointments and that clerks had been instructed to falsify records

SERVICES PROVIDED: Appointment scheduling, benefits assistance, VA enrollment help, grief counseling and other services.

NUMBER OF VETERANS ASSISTED: 119

WHAT ELSE: A homeless veteran who spent his last $40 on a cab ride to the VCCC was advised he would receive substantial retroactive benefits for a service-connected disability, as well as help getting into a home. The spouse of one veteran was advised that she will be receiving $60,000 in retroactive benefits and $1,200 a month in Dependency Indemnity Compensation from VA after getting help at this VCCC.

"If I didn't get indoors, I don't know if I could have made it another winter out there."

A homeless Vietnam War veteran *who received notification of substantial retroactive disability benefits at the VCCC, as well as assistance through a government housing program.*

“First of all, before tonight I didn’t know
what The American Legion was.
I thought it was a place where
old veterans sit around and talk.
But after tonight, I know
I have another resource.
And that gives me a glimmer of hope.”

Michael Saffold, Sr., *Grenada-era veteran*
at the St. Louis American Legion town hall meeting

NO. 5 St. Louis, Soldiers Memorial Military Museum and St. Louis University School of Law Clinic

WHEN: July 14-18

WHY: Long wait times, including VA report showing veterans were waiting an average of 86 days for specialty care

SERVICES PROVIDED: Benefits assistance, VA health-care enrollment, grief counseling, documentation of quality problems

NUMBER OF VETERANS ASSISTED: 178

WHAT ELSE: Veterans complained of a lack of top leadership in the system and blamed that for appointment delays, quality lapses and other problems.

"The American Legion has seemed to bring some people together so we can move forward."

***Operation Iraqi Freedom Army veteran Kevin Boyer**, who has been fighting for an appeal of a VA claims decision and received help at the St. Louis VCCC*

“These crisis centers are just amazing.”

Mary Riley, *VA employee who helped at the Baltimore VCCC*

NO. 6 Arbutus, Md., American Legion Post 109 and Loch Raven VA Outpatient Center, Baltimore

WHEN: July 29 – Aug. 1

WHY: Inconsistent delivery of care throughout the health-care system, long waiting times and history of accuracy problems in VA claims processing

SERVICES PROVIDED: VA benefits applications, help getting appointments set up, grief counseling

NUMBER OF VETERANS ASSISTED: 143

WHAT ELSE: Veterans said the quality and performance of their community-based outpatient clinic was generally superior to that of the Baltimore VA Medical Center. This was also the sixth straight VCCC that included support from the American Red Cross. "They've been great partners with us since we began these crisis centers," American Legion Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Division Director Verna Jones said. Also, VA's mobile veterans center was parked outside to assist veterans.

"The American Legion has taken a standpoint of ensuring all veterans know about their benefits – health, VBA, mental health services."

Wesley Walls, *public affairs officer for the Louis A. Johnson VAMC in Clarksburg, W. Va.*

NO. 7 American Legion Post 31, Shinnston, W. Va.

WHEN: Aug. 5-6

WHY: The Clarksburg, W. Va., VA Medical Center was found to have extremely long appointment waits, including the second longest average waiting time in the nation for mental health

SERVICES PROVIDED: Assisted veterans with claims processing, appeals, scheduling problems, and appointment scheduling

NUMBER OF VETERANS ASSISTED: 82

WHAT ELSE: In two days, $17,000 in retroactive benefits were paid to veterans on the spot

"I've learned more in the last hour than I did in the past five years."

Veteran at The American Legion VCCC in Shinnston, W. Va.

“I actually met with someone today, and she heard my story – not like sending a bunch of papers to some random person.”

A 20-year-old disabled female Air Force veteran
with service-connected hip bone disintegration, who had not received a disability rating from VA, to date.

Photo by Brett Flashnick

NO. 8 Charlotte, N.C.

WHEN: Aug. 25-27

WHY: Site of the 96th American Legion National Convention

SERVICES PROVIDED: Benefits claims assistance, help for homeless veterans, referrals for mental health services

NUMBER OF VETERANS ASSISTED: 283

WHAT ELSE: Veterans and their families were awarded $300,885 in retroactive VA benefits on the spot. Two homeless veterans were provided immediate assistance and referred to a local program designed to lead them to permanent housing.

"This was another successful collaboration between The American Legion and VA."

Verna Jones, director, *American Legion Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Division*

"This is the way the process should be. Every veteran should be able to come here and get an honest answer and breakdown of where they stand, in plain terms, in terms they can understand."

U.S. Navy veteran Rickey Byrd, *who came to the Honolulu Veterans Crisis Command Center to find answers about a long-delayed VA benefits claim*

Photo by Kent Nishimura

NO. 9 Honolulu

WHEN: Sept. 9-12

WHY: According to an audited study, Hawaii veterans have the longest wait time in the nation – an average of 145 days – to get VA primary care appointments. Access to care is expensive and difficult to achieve for many veterans who pay over $200 a ticket to fly to the VA Medical Center on Oahu.

SERVICES PROVIDED: Benefits assistance, claims processed on the spot, VA appointment delays addressed, mobile VA Vet Center available.

NUMBER OF VETERANS ASSISTED: Approximately 100

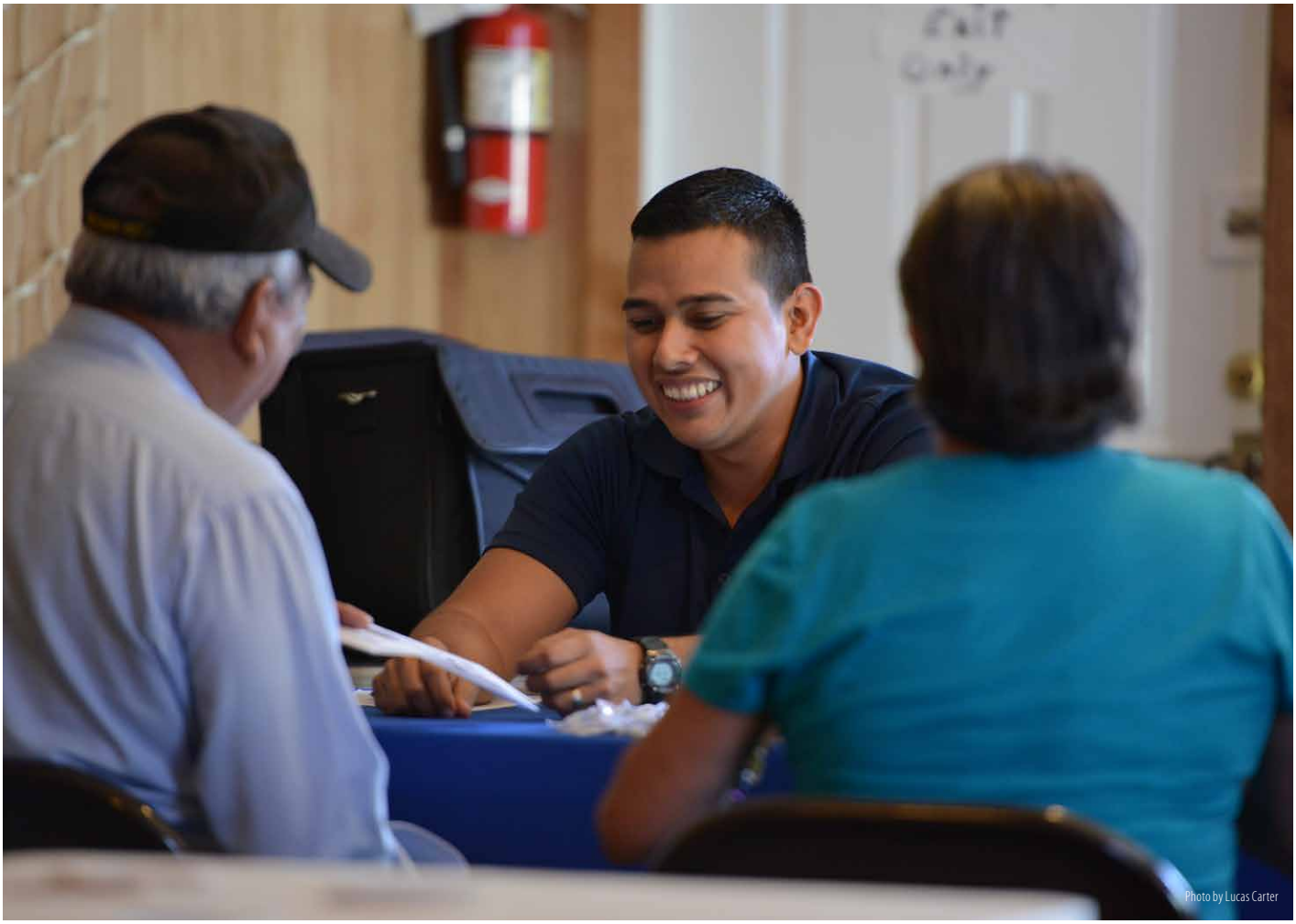
WHAT ELSE: One widow of a veteran who died of conditions related to Agent Orange exposure was informed at the center that she is eligible for upwards of $30,000 in retroactive VA benefits. Active-duty personnel attended the Legion's Town Hall meeting, voicing concerns about the future of the system that will take care of their health-care needs after they discharge.

"What are we doing about the guys coming out (of the military) now? What are we doing so that this doesn't continue to be a cyclical, never-ending process?"

Army Sgt. 1st Class Jason Scott, *who is stationed in Hawaii, and attended The American Legion Town Hall meeting in Honolulu*

“Knowing I have the support of The American Legion to be able to provide this assistance on my claim will help me in the long run.”

Marine Corps Leonardo Lopez, *who received assistance at the VCCC on a medical claim that had languished for 14 months without a decision*



NO. 10 Harlingen, Texas

WHEN: Sept. 15-17

WHY: Harlingen is one of six regional clinics that make up the South Texas Health System, which covers 40,000 enrollees in a sprawling area of 20 counties in a very rural part of the state. Communication gaps have created many issues for veterans trying to get health care.

SERVICES PROVIDED: VA appointment scheduling, grief counseling, benefits claims and assistance with enrolling in VA health care

NUMBER OF VETERANS ASSISTED: 66

WHAT ELSE: Veterans consistently complained about communications breakdowns with VA, including a failure to disclose to patients when third-party companies were used for appointment scheduling.

"I had an appointment that was 120 days down the road with my primary doctor. They took care of it and moved it up a month and a half."

Jake Watrous, *a member of American Legion Post 439 and resident of Santa Rosa, Texas*

“All this time I’ve been with the VA trying to get something done and nothing ever happened. Suddenly we find out all these things can happen.”

World War II veteran Robert Freeman,
who has struggled with VA over a heart condition, glasses and hearing aid replacement, unable to see his primary care physician

NO. 11 White City and Medford, Ore.

WHEN: Sept. 22-24

WHY: Southern Oregon Rehabilitation Center and Clinics rank in the top 10 nationally for longest wait times for appointments; veterans there report difficulty getting the right kind of care in a timely fashion without having to drive great distances

SERVICES PROVIDED: Benefits applications filed and processed, GI Bill information shared, disability ratings problems addressed

NUMBER OF VETERANS ASSISTED: 87

WHAT ELSE: VA medical staff were on hand for the event to give no fewer than 60 flu shots. A 100-percent service-disabled veteran complained that care he received from a non-VA provider had cost him over $25,000 which was supposed to have been paid by VA.

"Hope is a magic word."

Vietnam Air Force veteran Lewis Myer, *who began the process of re-rating his 30 percent service-connected disability rating at the Legion crisis center*

“We have to do a better job of answering the phone. It’s not an excuse that because we get 5,000 calls a day, some are just going to get missed.”

VA VISN 5 Director Fernando Rivera,
who oversees facilities in Washington, D.C., as well as Maryland and West Virginia

VETERANS' BENEFITS CENTER

NO. 1 Washington, D.C., VA Medical Center

WHEN: Sept. 29-Oct. 2

WHY: Launched transition to the Veterans' Benefits Center in the nation's capital, helped veterans facing extremely long waiting times to see VA doctors, demonstrated electronic information resources, filed benefits claims applications, estimated compensation due to veterans, provided free flu shots, answered GI Bill questions

NUMBER OF VETERANS ASSISTED: 396

WHAT ELSE: Communications issues were a common frustration, both in terms of returned phone calls and status reports from VA. American Legion National Commander Mike Helm attended the center and reiterated the Legion's position against the vouchering out of VA health care to private-sector providers.

"It seems like The American Legion is on the attack as far as helping these veterans get what they honestly deserve and honorably deserve."

Marine Corps veteran Jonathan Kirby, *who came to the Benefits Center to see about getting his disability rating changed*

“The American Legion picked me up when I was broken. Without them, I would probably be homeless.”

U.S. Navy veteran Christopher Li,
who attended two days of The American Legion’s Veterans Benefits Center event in Long Beach, Calif., hoping for help with his VA claim

VETERANS' BENEFITS CENTER
NO. 2 Long Beach and Inglewood, Calif.

WHEN: Oct. 27-30

WHY: To address needs in a highly populated area where veteran unemployment, homelessness and difficulties finding adequate services are well documented

SERVICES PROVIDED: Claims assistance, help with disability ratings, appeals, information about how to obtain VA identification cards

NUMBER OF VETERANS ASSISTED: 186

WHAT ELSE: The widow of an Army veteran saw The American Legion emblem and entered the Inglewood event where, after three years waiting for results of a misfiled VA claim, received urgent results.

"This is invaluable – the opportunity to meet with veterans and discuss their issues and their claims. It's a great opportunity for us to provide the best service we can."

Emmett O'Meara, *Veterans Service Center manager for VA's Los Angeles regional office*

"'At the end of January, I was going to be homeless, basically. This gave me hope. It's a relief. It's not the 'hurry up and wait.'"

Greta Denny,
U.S. Army veteran who received assistance at the Jan. 14 Veterans Benefits Center

VETERANS' BENEFITS CENTER
NO. 3 Bay Pines, Fla.

WHEN: Jan. 14-15 (Town Hall meeting Jan. 12, Madeira Beach)

WHY: With more than 1.5 million veterans, Florida has one of the nation's highest concentrations of VA enrollees in the nation. Bay Pines VA Medical Center is one of the largest VA hospitals. VA disability claims processing there lags in quality and processing times, according to performance measurements documented by VA.

SERVICES PROVIDED: Claims assistance, help for homelessness, assistance for women veterans and disability ratings reviewed and adjusted.

NUMBER OF VETERANS ASSISTED: 175

WHAT ELSE: Several veterans who had been waiting months for claims or disability ratings decisions received on-the-spot answers. Staged at the medical center, the event involved close collaboration between VA and American Legion staff.

"I felt like I got the honest truth, and not only truth, but compassion. It's so much more important to be face to face, due to the fact that you do feel the compassion."

Jene Adeoye, *U.S. Army veteran, who came to the VBC to learn about benefits eligibility*

"It's very valuable because you don't have to go through somebody putting you on hold to go find somebody, and then that not being the person to help you. Then you end up sitting on the phone for almost an hour and still aren't helped. It's very valuable coming here and going face to face with these guys."

Irving Joyner,
U.S. Army, 1980-92

Photo by Charles Mostoller

VETERANS' BENEFITS CENTER
NO. 4 Philadelphia, Pa., VA Medical Center

WHEN: March 16-19, 2015

WHY: Long appointment times, access problems, patient-service breakdowns

SERVICES PROVIDED: Claims assistance, disability ratings upgrades, first-time enrollment in VA and education about VA programs.

NUMBER OF VETERANS ASSISTED: 237

WHAT ELSE: American Legion national staff were also on hand specifically to assist homeless veterans during the VBC.

"I've managed to find some hope here today."

Oswald Nance, *Korean War veteran who said he received more help in one day at the VBC than he had in 50 years of frustration with VA over his disability claims and benefits*

"The time we spent in today's discussion has been more helpful than a year of me trying to send paperwork back and forth, trying to get to the right people."

Rainey Hardin,
U.S. Marine Corps, Gulf War era

Photo by Andrea Morales

VETERANS' BENEFITS CENTER
NO. 5 Memphis, Tenn.

WHEN: April 20-23, 2015

WHY: Memphis-area veterans have expressed frustrations with long wait times for appointments. Other complaints include rejected or delayed claims, being treated "like a guinea pig" by inexperienced staff and difficulty finding parking places.

SERVICES PROVIDED: Claims assistance, disability ratings upgrades, first-time enrollment in VA and education about VA programs.

NUMBER OF VETERANS ASSISTED: 130

WHAT ELSE: The town hall meeting was hosted by Post 53 in West Memphis, Ark., drawing veterans from Arkansas, Tennessee and Mississippi.

""I'm glad the Legion came down here. More got done today with my claim today than in the past eight years."

Gordon Richardson, *Air Force veteran, who will receive back pay dating back eight years*

THE AMERICAN LEGION

VETERANS' BENEFITS CENTER

"By its very nature, crisis can't last forever.
If it does, what's the end result?

Crisis has to end, and the scandal that took place from the spring up until late summer is over.
But, we've learned so much from that.

We want to continue to offer the service to veterans because of the environment that we create:
the environment of friendliness, the environment that we are here, in fact, to help.

We cannot do it alone. VA cannot do it alone.
We have to work together."

Ralph Bozella,
American Legion Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Commission Chairman,
in Washington, D.C., at the first Veterans' Benefits Center

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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www.legion.org/veteranshealthcare