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**News Release**

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**VA Takes Action to Ensure Data Integrity of Disability Claims**

*Under Secretary Hickey Announces Actions in Congressional Hearing*

WASHINGTON – The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) today announced several actions the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) is taking to ensure the integrity and accuracy of claims systems and processes. Under Secretary for Benefits Allison Hickey outlined the actions in testimony before the House Veterans Affairs Committee late Monday evening.

“The Veterans Benefits Administration takes seriously its commitment to providing timely, accurate benefits, and maintaining the integrity of our systems and processes,” said Under Secretary for Benefits Allison Hickey. “We have many checks and balances in our systems and data, and we are working to add even more as we improve delivery of earned benefits.”

**VA has announced the following actions:**

* Acting Secretary of Veterans Affairs Sloan Gibson has directed that an expert team be assembled to determine possible scenarios where an individual might find a way “around the system” and decide if further controls are needed.
* VA has directed a 100-percent facility and desk audit of mail and documentation at all 56 regional offices. The purpose of the review is to ensure records management compliance and proper control, storage, and maintenance of claim mail and other benefit-related documents.
* VBA’s quality program has been independently verified in the past, but in order to be responsive to concerns and further instill trust in the system that serves our Veterans, Under Secretary Hickey recently directed VBA to apply for ISO 9001 certification – considered the ultimate global benchmark for quality management, which would provide additional external validation and additional quality assurance of VBA’s data.
* When any individual is found to have worked around the standard claims process, the Acting Secretary will respond quickly to begin necessary actions. One of those actions is to immediately notify the Office of Inspector General, where VA proactively refers cases on an ongoing basis as was done with allegations in the Baltimore regional office.
* VA will also continue to provide publicly-available performance data on benefits through its Monday Morning Workload Reports every week at [www.vba.va.gov/reports](http://www.vba.va.gov/reports).

In testimony, Hickey stressed that she values the input from her employees, 52 percent of whom are Veterans, and VBA must protect whistleblowers and eliminate any intimidation or retaliation against those who identify cases in which employees may have taken inappropriate action. She also discussed weekly calls that she holds with front-line staff only, no managers, in order to solicit input from employees.

Acting Secretary Gibson recently met with Carolyn Lerner, Special Counsel of the United States Office of Special Counsel, and committed VA to working to achieve compliance with the OSC 2302 (c) Certification Program, and also reaffirmed his focus on ensuring protection from retaliation for employees who identify or report problems.

On Monday, VBA announced it had completed its one millionth disability claim in fiscal year 2014, and is on track to complete more than 1.3 million claims this year – ensuring that nearly 200,000 more Veterans will receive decisions on their disability claims than fiscal year 2013, and marking the fifth year in a row VBA has completed over one million disability claims.   VBA has reduced the claims backlog by more than 55 percent from its peak of 611,000 in March 2013, and Veterans with pending claims have been waiting, on average, 128 fewer days for a decision on their claim.  At the same time, the accuracy of rating decisions continues to improve. VA’s national “claim-level” accuracy rate is currently 91 percent – an eight-percentage-point improvement since 2011.

 Disability rating claim decisions in many cases open access to other VA benefits, such as dependency and burial claims benefits, and are managed in the non-rating work categories. In fiscal year 2013, VBA completed 2.5 million non-rating products – the highest production of claims in the non-rating category in 15 years.

“While VBA has made significant progress toward eliminating the disability rating claims backlog, we must also improve productivity on other categories of non-rating work,” said Hickey. “We still need to do a better job in timely delivery of these benefits, which is why we have been implementing a seven-initiative-effort to focus on non-rating claims.”

Some of these efforts include hiring 200 temporary employees to process non-rating claims and the new Rules-Based Processing System (RBPS), which automates dependency claims submitted online and can pay Veterans in as little as one day for over 50% of claims filed. VBA is also utilizing contractor support to enter existing paper claims into RBPS to provide faster benefits to Veterans.

VBA posts data on the disability claims backlog, the non-rating workload and other publicly available data on our performance on a weekly, monthly and annual basis through its reports web site:[www.vba.va.gov/reports](http://www.vba.va.gov/reports). For more information about disability and other Veterans benefits, visit [www.ebenefits.va.gov](https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits-portal/ebenefits.portal).

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