



THE UNDER SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS FOR BENEFITS  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20420

APR 23 2012

The Honorable Wally Herger  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Herger:

Thank you for your concern for the California Veterans and their families who are experiencing long delays in the processing of their claims as a result of workload and performance issues at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Regional Office (RO) in Oakland. We share your concern and are taking aggressive action to improve the performance of the Oakland RO. A similar response is being sent to Congressman Thompson.

During our meeting on March 27, 2012, I briefed you, your staff, and other members of the Northern California Delegation on the several actions I directed to improve performance at the Oakland RO. This letter lists the elements of the plan to improve service delivery that we began implementing at the Oakland RO on March 27<sup>th</sup>. Our goal is to achieve significant improvements in the quality and timeliness of claims processing. We have also made it a priority to enhance our communications with congressional stakeholders.

The performance improvement plan includes the following:

- Implementing "Challenge" training for the entire regional office in June 2012 to improve employee skill levels and decision quality. Mr. Thomas Murphy, Director of the Compensation Service, will schedule experienced trainers to lead the RO through intensive Challenge training using nationally developed training curricula. This is a major undertaking and a step never executed before – to retrain an entire RO.
- The Western Area Director, Mr. Willie C. Clark, Sr., will work from the Oakland RO for the next several months to oversee the execution of the improvement plan and mentor the new RO leadership team.
- In addition to technical training, the RO will receive team training, supervisory training, and communications training. Utilizing these types of curricula will sharpen focus and improve cooperation and cohesion to achieve mission requirements.
- The RO shifted 27 employees to the Rating Veterans Service Representative position and four employees to the Decision Review Officer position to increase the capacity for processing claims and appeals. The RO also increased the number of employees assigned to its congressional liaison staff in order to improve service and responsiveness to congressional inquiries.

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- As part of the Veterans Benefits Administration's Transformation plan, the new Simplified Notification Letter process (SNL) was recently implemented at the RO. The SNL initiative allows decision makers to prepare decisions using simpler language and more concise text, resulting in increased productivity and easier-to-understand decision documents with a higher level of quality and consistency.
- The RO also established a Quality Review Team, another national Transformation initiative that provides for in-process quality reviews to eliminate errors at the earliest possible stage of the claims process.
- The RO is receiving brokering assistance from other VA regional offices to reduce the pending claims inventory. Specifically, new claims and ready-for-decision claims are being sent to regional offices in Lincoln, Nebraska, and Muskogee, Oklahoma, for processing. This effort began in March 2012. We will establish points of contact at these other regional offices for your staff to call and check on the status of your constituents' claims.
- The new Oakland RO Director, Mr. Douglas Bragg, will engage in face-to-face discussions with each of the 21 Northern California congressional district offices over the coming months. Mr. Willie Clark, the Western Area Director, will participate in many of these visits. These visits will introduce the station's leadership team (which will shortly include the new Assistant Director, whose appointment is in the final stages of processing) to congressional stakeholders. They will also provide opportunities to address individual and overall service-delivery issues. Mr. Bragg fully intended to begin these visits immediately after the March 27 meeting. Sadly, he unexpectedly experienced the loss of his daughter. Due to family bereavement and burial needs over these last 2 to 3 weeks, he has not been able to begin these visits. Mr. Bragg and Mr. Clark will be available to begin these visits next week.

I am confident that the planned investments in employee training, management oversight, and additional resources focused on Oakland's workload will improve the RO's performance. Our efforts will be enhanced through continued information sharing and open communications with you and your staff. Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,



Allison A. Hickey