



THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON
November 4, 2011

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

Dear Congressman Herger:

Thank you for your follow-up letter regarding delays in processing notices of disagreement (NOD) by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Regional Office (RO) in Oakland, California. I regret the delay in responding. I fully share your concern that Veterans served by the Oakland RO receive timely decisions on their disability claims and appeals.

The Oakland RO has taken several actions to shorten the processing time for NODs. It recently promoted 4 decision review officers (DRO) to the appeals team, increasing the total number of DROs from 7 to 11. Over the last twelve months, the office promoted 27 new rating specialists to Oakland's disability claims evaluation teams to improve the timeliness of rating decisions. The RO's permanent staffing level increased from 259 full-time employees in FY 2010 to 280 full-time employees in FY 2011, having been authorized to convert temporary employees hired under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) to permanent staff positions. The RO is currently intensely training the ARRA employees and new rating specialists to enhance their productivity. The addition of the rating specialists will allow the RO to further increase the appeals team staffing level in the near future.

With these staffing increases, the RO is making progress in improving appeals processing. In the nine-month period from January to September 2011, it more than doubled its monthly production of completed appeals cases.

There are many transformation efforts underway at VA to reduce the claims and appeals backlog. The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) recently established an Appeals Design Team to review and recommend bold changes to overhaul the appeals processing timeliness, increase consistency, improve quality, and raise the standard on outcomes. In particular, the team will look at standardizing regional office appeals processing; reducing the NOD rate; enhancing the role of DROs and their effectiveness in processing; and ramping up joint VBA/Board of Veterans' Appeals training to improve remand decisions, processing, and synchronization.

I hope this information is helpful to you. Thank you for your concern and your continuing support of our mission.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Eric K. Shinseki", is positioned above the printed name. The signature is fluid and cursive.

Eric K. Shinseki