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Unopened Claims Letters Hidden at VA Offices

By [Rick Maze](#) - Staff writer Posted : Wednesday Mar 4, 2009 16:56:42 EST Reprinted with permission.

A new report about Veterans Affairs Department employees squirreling away tens of thousands of unopened letters related to benefits claims is sparking fresh concerns that veterans and their survivors are being cheated out of money.

VA officials acknowledge further credibility problems based on a new report of a previously undisclosed 2007 incident in which workers at a Detroit regional office turned in 16,000 pieces of unprocessed mail and 717 documents turned up in New York in December during amnesty periods in which workers were promised no one would be penalized.

“Veterans have lost trust in VA,” Michael Walcoff, VA’s under secretary for benefits, said at a hearing Tuesday. “That loss of trust is understandable, and winning back that trust will not be easy.”

Unprocessed and unopened mail was just one problem in VA claims processing mentioned by Belinda Finn, VA’s assistant inspector general for auditing, in testimony before the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee.

Auditors also found that the dates recorded for receiving claims, which in many cases determine the effective date for benefits

payments, are wrong in many cases because of intentional and unintentional errors, Finn said.

The worst case uncovered by auditors involved the New York regional office, where employees testified that managers told staff to put later dates on claims to make it appear claims were being processed faster. A review found that 56 percent of claims had incorrect dates, although no evidence was found of incorrect or delayed benefits payments. Finn said workers reported that this practice had been used for years.

The new report comes as VA is trying to resolve an earlier controversy involving documents essential to the claims process that were discovered in bins awaiting shredding at several regional offices, which raised questions about how many past claims had been delayed or denied because of intentional or unintentional destruction of documentation.

‘IT IS IMPOSSIBLE NOT TO BE SHOCKED’

Kathryn Witt of Gold Star Wives of America said survivors trying to receive VA benefits have long complained about problems getting accurate information and missing claims. “When they call to check on the status of the claim, they are often told that the VA has no record of their claim and that they should resubmit their paperwork,” she said.

In one case, a woman claimed she had to submit paperwork to VA three times to prove she was married and had three children, Witt said.

And having to resubmit the same claim, she added, does nothing to reduce the backlog that already forces survivors to wait six to nine months for simple claims to be approved.

“It is impossible not to be shocked by the numbers from Detroit,” said Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Ariz., who chairs the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee’s oversight and investigations panel. “Shredding documents or burying them in the bottom drawer is a breach of trust. Whether that breach of trust comes as a consequence of inadequate training or negligent or deliberate behavior, Congress must not and will not tolerate it.”

It is unclear, however, whether there is any short-term fix.

A permanent solution is to have a fully electronic claims process to establish a record of when documents are received and their status as they move through the process. A fully electronic system will not be in place before 2011, VA officials said.

Kerry Baker of Disabled American Veterans said a short-term answer could be to scan all documents related to claims into computer

systems. Baker, DAV’s assistant national legislative director, said this could be done at one or more large-scale imaging centers that would transform paper into electronic records.

“A large section of the veterans community and representatives of the community have long felt that the Veterans Benefits Administration operates in such a way that stalls the claims process until frustrated claimants either give up or die,” Baker said.

He said that although he doesn’t believe that is true, something must be done.

“Denying earned benefits by illegally destroying records should serve as the proverbial wake-up call that signals the urgency of this overdue transformation,” he said.

Geneva Moore, a senior veterans service representative from Winston-Salem, N.C., who testified on behalf of the American Federation of Government Employees, a union that counts about 160,000 VA workers among its members, said backdating claims and document shredding are signs of a claims system under stress.

“Clearly, if the disability claims process were already paperless, many of the problems being considered at this hearing today would no longer exist,” she said.

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