

Statement of Ranking Member Burr

December 11, 2013

Good morning, Mr. Chairman. Welcome to you and to the representatives from VA.

As we'll hear today, VA has taken a number of steps to try to improve its handling of disability claims and, in recent months, the backlog has started to decline. Although any true progress is welcome, I think there are still many reasons for concern.

To start with, nearly 700,000 veterans and their families do not yet have an answer to their requests for benefits, and they can expect to wait at least nine months for a decision. Also, we continue to hear from veterans' groups about how often VA makes mistakes in processing disability claims. In fact, the American Legion recently testified that it found errors in over half of the decisions it reviewed last year.

This is a real concern, because it can take years for a veteran to correct those errors through VA's appeal process. Today, more than a quarter of a million appeals are waiting to be resolved, and this number has been trending upward.

Other work has also been piling up, such as claims for accrued benefits; responses to incoming mail; and adjustments to monthly checks based on how many dependents a veteran is claiming. The number of dependency adjustments waiting for VA action has tripled in just over two years, and what VA calls pending "correspondence" has grown nearly five times since last year. All of this raises questions about how VA is prioritizing work that is not counted in its backlog statistic.

Mr. Chairman, before I turn it back to you, I also want to mention another step VA took to reduce its backlog -- using "provisional" decisions in cases where some evidence had not yet been received. As you know, we asked the Inspector General to review this initiative to make sure claimants would receive appropriate, quality decisions without any unnecessary hurdles.

Although that review is not finished, the Inspector General testified last week that it found errors in 10 out of 11 provisional decisions at one regional office. In fact, it appears that employees were encouraged to violate VA policy, by making provisional decisions without first obtaining necessary medical examinations. That office has now reviewed all of its provisional decisions and found hundreds that contained errors.

Mr. Chairman, all of this suggests that more must be done to make sure VA's efforts to reduce the backlog will not cause veterans and their families more delays or frustrations down the road. VA must be held accountable for making real, lasting improvements in the service provided to those seeking benefits from VA. I look forward to working with you to ensure that happens.

I thank the Chair and yield back.