

STATEMENT OF
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FOR THE RECORD

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

WITH RESPECT TO

Faster Decisions, Stronger Outcomes: VA's Work to Streamline the Disability Claims Backlog

Washington, D.C.

April 15, 2026

Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano and Members of the Committee:

The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) appreciates the opportunity to submit this statement for the record on ways the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) worked to address its disability claims backlog.

The VFW is a veterans service organization (VSO) recognized by Department of Veterans Affairs for the preparation, presentation, and prosecution of VA benefit claims before the agency under 38 U.S.C. Chapter 59. At the end of fiscal year 2025, the VFW held power of attorney in this process for more than 700,000 veterans and eligible dependents, with more than 600,000 active awards, totaling more than \$16.2 billion in benefits delivered to veterans in FY2025.

Our global network of more than 2,000 accredited representatives assists claimants daily in navigating the complex VA benefits system. As such, the VFW offers a unique, ground-level perspective on both the progress and persistent challenges within the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA).

VA recently announced that it has reduced its disability claims backlog below 100,000 claims pending for more than 125 days. The VFW applauded VA Secretary Doug Collins and the VA workforce for this achievement. However, this should also serve as an inflection point for the Department as it seeks better ways to deliver timely benefits to veterans who have earned them.

The backlog of VA disability claims first started to tick up during the COVID-19 pandemic when VA paused examinations but then accelerated after the implementation of the *Honoring our PACT Act of 2022*, when VA started to process an influx of presumptive toxic exposure claims from veterans across multiple generations.

VA initially projected that its *PACT Act* claims inventory would peak around March 2024 with an estimated 600,000 backlogged claims. VA outperformed this projection. The backlog peaked instead in January 2024 at about 400,000 claims, while total receipts for claims far exceeded VA's initial projections. By increasing ratings output and automating certain back-end processes, VA more effectively managed its claims workload, despite the persistent influx of benefit claims. In fact, for the preceding three fiscal years, VA adjudicated more claims than ever before. Moreover, VA learned a strong lesson from 2013 and ensured it did not ignore its non-*PACT Act* workload, continuing to deliver non-*PACT Act* rating decisions in a timely manner.

The VFW has not viewed this claims backlog in the same way as past backlogs because the veterans we represent did not view it the same way. In fact, we told VA officials over the years that we would no longer use the term "backlog" to talk about VA's pending workload because this old way of talking about the process did not accurately capture the expectations or experiences of veterans navigating this complex system.

Instead, we recommended that VA provide a more transparent assessment of how a claim proceeded from the time of filing, establishing the claim, initial processing, development (gathering evidence and completing exams), building the rating, and processing the award. Each of these phases is instructive to where bottlenecks persist and should be viewed as individual pain points – or "backlogs." Looking at an arbitrary 125 days from start to finish fails to account for variance in number of conditions claimed, complexity of the claim, and difficulty in acquiring records or exams. For example, the backlog of military sexual trauma claims, which required specialized processing, was fundamentally different from the backlog of *PACT Act* claims related to gastrointestinal conditions when VA updated the regulations and required rework of many pending claims. These problems demanded very different solutions and different ways to manage expectations for veterans. However, VA does not offer this granular level of information publicly to veterans, which leaves accredited representatives to manage expectations, hoping that our clients trust the explanation.

This backlog was fundamentally different from 2013 because today's bottlenecks were almost exclusive to development, evidence gathering, and examinations. Thanks to innovations that VA implemented to resolve last decade's backlog, the processes that VA controls directly – initial processing, rating, and processing awards – are either automated or take days to complete instead of weeks for most rating bundle actions.

During the 2013 backlog, development lagged as well, but VA's internal processes could also take weeks because the system was paper-based and often handled by a single VA regional office. This also meant that processing timelines varied wildly across the enterprise, with busier offices facing backlogs far exceeding one full year.

The situation was so bad in 2013 that VA's average days to complete a claim at the end of FY2013 was 378 days. At the peak of the current backlog in FY2024, VA's average days to complete was 152 days and continued to fall throughout FY2025 (121 days), currently standing at 81 days through this fiscal year.

Several advancements make today's situation drastically different:

- **Technology Advancements**

VA's investment in modernized claims processing systems and digital tools has significantly improved efficiency. VA's national work queue – while imperfect – allows VA to cross-level work across its enterprise to avoid regional surges. VA has also automated many initial intake processes, such as VA “flagging” PACT Act-eligible claimant files to accelerate development. Automation, improved workflow management systems, and expanded digital records access have enabled faster decision-making. Additionally, enhanced tools for accredited representatives have helped streamline the submission and tracking of claims. The evolution of artificial intelligence (AI) offers VA opportunities to improve development, but AI has flaws. VFW continues to insist on human intervention to enhance implementation of AI to ensure accuracy.

- **Workforce Dedication and Increased Output**

The productivity and dedication of VBA employees cannot be overstated. VA increased hiring, implemented mandatory overtime, and drove record-level output to address incoming claims and backlog inventory. These efforts reflect a workforce committed to serving veterans under challenging conditions. VFW believes VA's workforce must be fully staffed and fully funded. Reductions in the workload cannot be sustained at an operational tempo that leads to burnout. Moreover, new hires must continue to receive high quality training that promotes proficiency and growth. It is impractical to expect VA's workforce to “do more with less.” VA must work just as diligently at workforce development and retention as it has in inventory reduction.

- **Fully Developed Claims and Complete Submissions**

When claims are submitted as complete packages—with all necessary medical evidence and documentation—they can be rated in a matter of days. This demonstrates that the system can operate efficiently when development requirements are minimized. However, this efficiency underscores a central challenge: Assembling a complete claim remains difficult for many veterans. VFW accredited representatives often report that in meeting with veterans to file claims, veterans experience challenges with VA physicians who are unwilling to complete disability benefit questionnaires (DBQs) related to their claim. Service members who are separating from active duty often experience delays with the military providing them with a copy of their service treatment records in a timely manner, and many report that private medical providers are unwilling to take the time to respond to requests for records that would meet the requirement to rate the claim without further delay. VA and Department of Defense (DoD) have made efforts to produce a single record that would eliminate some of these complications and VFW will continue to collaborate with both departments to identify a solution.

- **Declining Decision Quality**

A reduction in decision quality leads directly to increased supplemental claims, higher-level reviews (HLRs), appeals, and remands. When veterans must continuously re-engage the system to correct errors, it creates additional workload and delays for all claimants. VFW has testified multiple times that quality must be treated more substantially than speed. As processing has sped up during this backlog, quality has lagged. If a claim ends up in the cycle of remands and appeals because of poor quality, nothing is gained.

- **Development as the Primary Bottleneck**

The most significant driver of delays is not the rating process itself, but the development phase. Challenges include delays in obtaining service records, scheduling medical examinations, and requesting additional unnecessary evidence. These inefficiencies slow the entire system and prevent timely adjudication. VFW has consistently urged that VA review the veteran's record in its entirety before ordering exams. Far too often, VFW's accredited representatives report that VA overlooks evidence, leaving the veteran inconvenienced by erroneous requests for material that is already in the record.

- **Unnecessary Examinations and Rework**

The VFW has consistently raised concerns about the overuse of medical examinations and the rigidity of the contract medical exam system that frustrates veterans and advocates alike. Ordering exams when sufficient evidence already exists creates unnecessary delays, increases costs, and burdens veterans. Rework—caused by inadequate initial development, poor-quality exams, or rushed exams—further compounds the problem. VFW applauds VA for working towards giving the veteran agency over their exams with the development of enhanced scheduling tools and we urge their continued development. Additionally, consistent training and development of claims processors and raters will lead to more consistent ratings and reduce rework.

- **Non-Rating Claims Require Greater Attention**

Claims related to dependency, pension adjustments, and other administrative matters often receive less attention but can significantly impact veterans' financial stability. These claims must not be overlooked in the pursuit of reducing the compensation backlog.

- **Specialized Processing Models**

While specialized processing teams may improve short-term consistency, they do little to build long-term workforce expertise across the system. Over-specialization can create bottlenecks and reduce flexibility. The backlog of Military Sexual Trauma (MST) claims is one example of how specialization, without sufficient capacity, can lead to delays.

To ensure that recent progress leads to lasting reform, the VFW offers the following recommendations:

- **Continue Investment in Modern IT Systems**

The primary driver to reducing the 2013 backlog was the introduction of electronic tools to digitize the claims process. VA must prioritize the development of a modern, user-friendly claims submission portal for accredited representatives alongside efforts to modernize internal information systems, like Veteran Benefits Management System. Current reliance on legacy systems, such as the Stakeholder Enterprise Portal (SEP), limits efficiency and innovation. A modern platform would improve submission accuracy, reduce errors, and accelerate processing.

- **Improve Record Sharing Between DOD and VA**
 Seamless transfer of service and medical records from the Department of Defense (DOD) to VA remains essential. VA's ongoing efforts in this area are encouraging, but further improvements are needed. The Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program demonstrates how timely access to records can dramatically improve processing speed. Expanding similar capabilities across all claims would yield significant benefits.
- **Limit Examinations to When They Are Truly Necessary**
 The VFW supports VA leadership's goal of ordering medical examinations only when required. Clearer guidance, improved training, and stronger oversight are needed to ensure this principle is consistently applied. However, as VA seeks to change this business process, we must ensure that medical evidence is valid. The rise in pay-to-play actors submitting potentially fraudulent evidence means that VA raters must exercise discretion in weighing the validity of evidence.
- **Improve Scheduling and Accessibility of Examinations**
 When examinations are necessary, VA and its contractors must work collaboratively with veterans to schedule appointments at reasonable times and locations. Current practices often impose unrealistic timelines and require excessive travel, leading to missed appointments, inadequate exams, and further delays.
- **Strengthen Quality Assurance Measures**
 VA must invest in quality control at every stage of the claims process. Reducing errors at the initial decision point will decrease the volume of supplemental claims and appeals, ultimately improving efficiency and veteran satisfaction.
- **Address Development Bottlenecks Directly**
 Targeted solutions are needed to streamline evidence gathering, reduce redundant requests, and accelerate record acquisition. This includes leveraging technology, improving interagency coordination, and empowering claims processors to make timely decisions based on available evidence.
- **Balance Specialization with Workforce Development**
 While specialized teams may be necessary in certain contexts, VA must ensure that all claims processors receive comprehensive training and experience. A flexible, well-trained workforce is essential for long-term success.

The VFW commends VA for its progress in reducing the claims backlog and preventing the kinds of outlandish wait times veterans experienced in 2013. This achievement reflects meaningful improvements in technology, workforce capacity, and operational focus.

However, backlog reduction alone cannot be the sole measure of success. The goal must be a system that delivers accurate, timely, and fair decisions for every veteran through a transparent and nimble process.

The VFW stands ready to work with Congress, VA, DoD, and their partners to ensure that recent gains lead to lasting reform. We urge the Committee to continue its oversight and to ask critical questions about not just how the backlog has been reduced, but whether the system is truly improving for veterans.

Chairman Bost and Ranking Member Takano, thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record and we look forward to further dialogue with the committee and responding to any questions members of the Committee may have.