

**STATEMENT OF
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
BEFORE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS
NOVEMBER 7, 2013**

Good afternoon, Chairman Runyan, and members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss services provided to Veterans and their families throughout Nevada. I am accompanied today by Mr. Edward Russell, Director of the Reno Regional Office (RO).

As the seventh largest state in the United States, Nevada encompasses approximately 110,000 square miles. It is home to more than 244,000 Veterans who reside within the Reno RO's jurisdiction, with an additional 11,400 Veterans residing in 4 California counties also served by the Reno RO. Of these, approximately 33,500 Veterans receive VA compensation or pension benefits, and an additional 610 beneficiaries receive Survivors benefits. Over \$38.5 million in compensation and pension benefits are paid monthly.

As you are aware, Nevada is comprised of 17 counties, of which Clark County is the largest with a population of nearly 2 million, followed by Washoe County with a population over 420,000 and Elko County with a population of nearly 50,000. The majority of the state's population (88 percent) resides in only 2 counties, with the remaining population scattered throughout the remaining 15 counties. The smallest county, Esmeralda County, has a population of fewer than 800 people. Nevada is unique in that nearly 87 percent of the land is federally controlled, thus making the state an ideal location for those who enjoy rural living. However, one of the difficulties with rural living is limited accessibility to resources.

The Reno RO processes claims for disability compensation benefits and provides vocational rehabilitation and employment services for our disabled Veterans. The RO also provides claims assistance to over 600 Veterans and family members per month. In addition, the RO has an out-based office located in the newly opened VA Medical Center (VAMC) in North Las Vegas, approximately 450 miles from the main RO facility. The Las Vegas office primarily delivers vocational rehabilitation and employment services, placing rehabilitation counselors in the area where the majority of the jobs are located. This out-based office also has some limited claims processing capabilities and 4 intake specialists who assist over 2,150 visitors per month.

The Reno office provides space for five Veterans Service Organizations (VSO). The North Las Vegas VAMC provides space for nine VSOs. To overcome Nevada's geographical challenges, the RO collaborates with its stakeholders to provide outreach to our Veterans residing in remote areas. In addition to VSOs, the stakeholders working in partnership with the RO include: Nevada's two VAMCs, Congressional offices, Nevada Division of Veterans Services, Nellis Air Force Base, Fallon Naval Air Station, Nevada National Guard, and the Air National Guard. The RO participates with these stakeholders in their Veterans' events to extend outreach to Veterans and their families experiencing geographical obstacles. The following are a few examples of the Veterans' events held over the past year:

- The Reno VAMC held an open house day at the Outpatient Clinic in Winnemucca, Nevada. The population in the area is less than 7,500 and 2½ hours away from the RO. The RO was there to provide information and services. In addition, the RO had representatives at VAMC Veterans' events in Susanville, California, and Pahrump, Nevada.
- The RO attended local conferences held by Native American tribes to provide updates on Veterans benefits, answer questions, and provide direct assistance with claims. The RO also conducted outreach for local Native American tribes in partnership with the Reno VAMC.
- The RO participated in Senator Heller's Veterans' Roundtable.

- Congressman Amodei held quarterly town hall meetings across the 2nd District. The RO had representatives at every town hall to include Elko, Winnemucca, Fallon, and Carson City.
- Congresswoman Titus held a workshop and training session on the Fully Developed Claims Program and eBenefits for Veteran stakeholders in the North Las Vegas area.
- The RO continues to build strong relationships with the Nevada military bases at Nellis Air Force Base and Fallon Naval Air Station, the Nevada National Guard, and the Air National Guard. These relationships have allowed VA to participate with Servicemembers prior to discharge. The RO has military service coordinators assigned to Nellis Air Force Base. The RO also provides monthly briefings on VA benefits in Las Vegas and Fallon, Nevada. After deployments, the Reno RO has VA representatives at the Nevada National Guard and Air National Guard, who work closely with Servicemembers and their families to ensure they are well-educated on the benefits available to them.

Collaboration with the VSOs has been invaluable in serving Veterans in rural areas. Our VSO partners are knowledgeable about VA's benefit programs and the services provided by the RO. The Disabled American Veterans organization uses a mobile van to reach rural areas of the State. Because Nevada does not have county-based Veterans service officers in rural areas, the Nevada Division of Veterans Services is developing a plan to expand its services to rural areas to provide more outreach and increased accessibility for Nevada's Veterans. The RO is supporting the Nevada Division of Veterans Services with training and technology initiatives for their expansion project.

Two of VA's highest priority goals are to increase access for Veterans and their families across all areas of the country and eliminate the disability claims backlog in FY 2015 . VA's transformation plan includes a series of technology initiatives designed to achieve end-to-end digital filing capability, expanding accessibility for Veterans who do not live in close proximity to an RO. A key component of VA's transformation plan to

improve access to benefits and services is eBenefits, the joint VA and Department of Defense Web portal that provides Servicemembers and Veterans with immediate access to information and over 50 self-service options. Over 3 million Servicemembers and Veterans have already enrolled in eBenefits. Veterans can file their claims online through eBenefits, using a “turbo tax” like application that also allows Veterans to upload evidence to support their claims. Veterans also have access to VA’s national call centers, which respond to over 12 million calls nationally per year – more than 7,500 of which are from Nevada’s Veterans.

Most recently, VA introduced the Stakeholder Enterprise Portal (SEP), which is a secure, web-based connection that complements eBenefits and gives VSOs and other authorized advocates access to assist Veterans in filing disability claims electronically. SEP will help VSOs to expand services to Veterans in rural areas. Training on use of this medium is underway at the Reno RO, and it is anticipated that the majority of our VSOs will be utilizing the portal by the end of the calendar year.

With regard to leadership and staffing, the Reno RO has experienced challenges over the past few years as a result of retirements and transfers that have had an impact on performance. The RO is now in a rebuilding stage. The RO is allocated 93 full-time employees. At present, there are 90 full-time employees on board; however, the Veterans Service Center is fully staffed. To support its rebuilding, the Reno RO is utilizing all available technologies and tools to ensure consistent training is provided to employees across the RO and at the office in Las Vegas. Teleconferencing, videoconferencing, and in some cases, travel to the out-based office have been incorporated to ensure training needs are being met.

The RO is making significant progress in improving the delivery of benefits and services. In April 2013, the Reno RO had over 1,100 pending claims that were over 2 years old; by September 30, 2013, all of these had been completed. In June 2013, the Reno RO had over 4,000 claims that had been pending more than 1 year; only 187 remain pending. Over 70 percent of Reno’s employees are Veterans, and over

90 percent of the employees have a close relative who is a Veteran. These employees are dedicated to serving all Veterans residing in Nevada to the absolute best of their ability.

As stated previously, the strong partnerships with the many stakeholders in Nevada are key to our success. We will continue our efforts to enhance and expand accessibility for Veterans and their families throughout the state. The leadership and employees of the Reno RO are fully engaged in serving our Veterans and their families, and we are dedicated to ensuring they timely receive the benefits they have earned and deserve.

This concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions at this time.