

STATEMENT OF KRISTEN RUELL
October 3, 2014

My name is Kristen Ruell. I testified July 14, 2014 in Washington D.C. regarding gross mismanagement and violations of law occurring at the Philadelphia Regional Office. I want to thank you for the opportunity to be heard today regarding the Philadelphia RO and regret to inform you that things have not changed and accountability is greatly lacking for the management officials involved in the alleged illegal behaviors previously reported.

As a result of a preliminary OIG investigation, Fast letter 13-10 was rescinded. The practices of data manipulation have continued at the Philadelphia RO. Instead of creating an end product with an altered date of claim, there are many instances where claims are in the computer and have no dates of claims as if we never received them from a Claimant. These veterans are worse off because before they had a false, altered, new date of claim and now they have **no** date of claim. If the claim is old, I am seeing many instances where it is not placed under control at all, which affects the VA's average days pending.

The duplicate record problem has not changed. I was informed that VSOs are now able to create dates of claims, which are creating duplicate records. E benefits is creating duplicate records as well. A colleague of mine, Ryan Cease, has reported this to the VA Central Office, but to date has heard nothing regarding a policy change.

On July 14, 2014, I testified to boxes of claims that were processed in 2011 and were not scanned into Virtual VA, the Veterans virtual claim file system in place at the VA. Management scanned the sixty something boxes of thousands of claims into the system but did nothing to rectify the Veterans denied for not having information that was sitting in the boxes for nearly 4 years. There

is no way to track people affected by the management decision to let those claims sit for years.

The returned mail that was boxed up with the claims stamped “Cannot ID” were thoroughly reviewed and most employees that were on the project informed me that a majority of the claims could be identified with a few minutes of attention to detail and some claimants were getting retroactive benefits as a result of papers labeled “cannot ID” and had this not been reported, these boxes would have been shredded after being held the required one year timeframe. Employees also reported to me that they were given timelines to complete a box, when the timeline was not reasonable. One employee resigned after the project because he felt extremely stressed and rushed. I have received spreadsheets from concerned employees that are afraid to speak up regarding the Returned mail project. One employee went back and checked his spreadsheet and noticed that a number of the cases he marked “required action” have still not been cested and no action has been taken, although management stated the project is finished.

I have seen the reasonable accommodation process get worse for employees with disabilities. I feel as though the management team in the Pension Management Center should be removed from the process altogether, because they are creating liability on behalf of the Agency due to their inability or overt actions to fail to follow EEO laws. There is no reason for them to follow the law, because the Agency uses taxpayer monies to pay off employees that have been wronged and at best sends the management official to a training, for them to return to the office and target their next victim, with no consequences.

I have lost faith in the Department of Veterans Affairs. I have not seen any accountability for the managers responsible for the violations that were investigated by the VA OIG. They are still entrusted with making decisions with our taxpayer monies and on

behalf of our nations Veterans when they have admitted they cannot understand simple fast letter language and have left thousands of pieces of Veterans claims dating back to 2008 in white boxes with no action taken to grant or deny benefits. There is no training that can instill morals in these managers. They seem to be playing by a different set of rules and using our taxpayer dollars to have free legal representation when they are failing to provide timely accommodations for disabled employees and benefits to the Veterans that put their lives on the line for our nation. Employees repeatedly say to me that nothing is going to change here and refuse to report wrongdoing because they feel that there is no accountability and they will end up being targeted by the people they reported.

It is my sincere hope, as a citizen of the United States of America, that the Department of Veterans Affairs holds management accountable for retaliation toward whistleblowers and any alleged wrongdoings that are substantiated in the upcoming report from the VA OIG.