

STATEMENT OF WALTER J. TAFE

CONGRESSIONAL HEARING

OCTOBER 2, 2014

Congressman Runyan, Committee members, it is indeed an honor for me to provide testimony to this committee concerning issues surrounding the Philadelphia VA Regional Office and problems I've encountered during the claims filing process. I commend the committee, and especially Congressman Runyan, for their continued concern for the veterans of this district as well as those throughout our nation. It is my strong belief that our effective and honest communication about the failures in the system, as well as an examination of some success stories, can lead to an improved and expedited claim process that will serve our veterans with the commitment and integrity they have earned and deserve.

My office services Burlington County and its more than 35,000 veterans. We serve not only the veterans of our community but, with our close proximity to Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, we also process the claims of National Guardsman and Reservists as they return from deployment. We are proud of what we do, and feel honored to serve our nation's best. Unfortunately, our reputation can become tarnished when the claims we file on behalf of our veterans are not processed in a timely manner, or are simply "lost in the mail." I cannot count the number of times veterans have called me complaining that the regional office has not received information or claims my office has filed.

Over the past several years, I've witnessed a steady decline in the service provided by the Philadelphia Regional Office. Timely posting of claim information, processing and development, rating decisions, and final approval or disapproval has become a protracted and unmanageable process. What should be a brief process has turned into several months and, sadly, often exceeds a year. The communication process between the regional office (RO) and geographically separated veteran service officers is broken. Phone calls and emails go unanswered and, I suspect, mail is not opened or processed. While toll-free 800 numbers are provided, wait time can exceed 35 minutes. With the high volume of clients my office services, this is simply not acceptable.

In providing meaningful and helpful information, I want to avoid giving the impression that I am throwing stones at the VA. However, we Veteran Service Officers are the ones who stand face-to-face with veterans every day, trying to explain a system of endless errors and bureaucracy that simply cannot be explained or permitted to continue. I sometimes provide second, third, and fourth submissions of the same information only to be continually informed that it has not been received. Even when I fax in paperwork and have a successful send receipt on file, I'm still informed that the information was never sent.

One area of major concern is the communication between the RO and the veteran. Often, letters from the VA are confusing and contradictory. During the development stage, it's common for a veteran to receive multiple letters asking for information they already provided. To comply with the multiple

requests, a veteran will often re-submit the same information, slowing down the process. Each letter sent to the veteran allows for an additional 30-day reply time, which guarantees that another full month is added to an already lengthy delay. Simple, straightforward claims that could be completed within 90 to 120 days are taking 6 to 9 months, and the veteran or Veteran Service Officer is *always* blamed for the delay. They either didn't respond to a letter (which they never received), didn't show up for an appointment (which they didn't know about), or didn't send an address change to the RO (even though they did). The list is endless, but it's *never* the fault of the VA.

From my point of view, there are several areas that require immediate attention. Posting dependent information is a prime example. A veteran's compensation is increased depending on the number of dependents he or she has. The processing of this simple form can add hundreds of dollars to a veteran's claim. Processing this form takes an average of 9 months to a year for completion. I'm told by VA employees it is because this is not seen as a priority by the VA. To the veteran a few hundred dollars a month is meaningful and his or her frustration grows as the months pass.

Another area requiring immediate action is paying the veteran retroactive pay owed due to withholding actions because of receipt of retired pay. Veterans who receive retirement from their military service have their retroactive payment withheld until the VA receives verification from the Defense Finance and Accounting Office that Concurrent Retirement Disability Payment (CRDP) has not been paid. The intention of this process is to ensure the veteran does not receive double payment. This retroactive payment can sometimes be over \$100,000.00. Processing this payment can take 9 months to a year *after* DEFAS has verified the payment is due. Imagine, if you will, that someone owed you over \$100,000.00 and failed to pay month after month as your expenses mounted and your bills piled up. It's easy to see why elderly veterans feel the VA is waiting for them to die. When a veteran owns the VA money, they move to collect the debt almost immediately...but when the tables are turned, the VA is unwilling or unable to make their outstanding payments in a timely manner.

Often, Dependent Indemnity Compensation (DIC) claims—the pension the VA provides to the widow or widower of a veteran who dies from service-connected illness—are delayed due to bureaucratic requirements that have no impact on the outcome of a claim. The vast majority of these claims are straightforward cases that could be resolved in a matter of weeks, or even days; instead they end up taking months to process. If a Vietnam Veteran dies of an Agent Orange-listed illness, and was being compensated for the same illness at the time of death, it should be a simple matter of verifying the cause of death listed on the death certificate and approving the claim. Yet these claims will be held up in development for months before arriving at the rating office. Often these claims are delayed for foolish or insulting questions. The example of Mrs. Genna Stanley comes to mind. Mrs. Stanley was married to her husband, veteran Harry Stanley for over 50 years and he was rated 100 percent for cancer. When Mr. Stanley died, the cancer he was rated for was listed as cause of death on his death certificate. His widow's approval for DIC was delayed for months because she failed to notify the VA whether or not she had remarried after her husband's death. Adding insult to injury, the question was totally irrelevant since a widow who remarries after the age of 56 is still entitled to the DIC.

Pensions for low income veterans are another area for immediate action; they take far too long to process. We are informed that we can file a financial hardship for a veteran in severe financial need...however, pretty much any veteran filing for a low income pension can be said to be experiencing financial hardship! I can't speak to turnaround the VA reports for completing claims. I can only speak to my experience, and that tells me that the process itself is hardly the picture of efficiency. I would like to tell my veterans it will take 120 days, but the reality of my experience is that these claims can take up to a year.

I can offer innumerable examples of veterans who have suffered due to the delay in processing claims, but time doesn't permit me to expound. Suffice it to say that many of my veterans have become extremely frustrated when hearing about bonus programs at the Regional Offices that reward workers for their efficiency while they face a seemingly endless wait for much-needed financial help. Sadly, the majority of veterans have completely lost faith in an institution that was established to protect their rights and make amends for their injuries.

All is not doom and gloom however, and I would be remiss if I did not note some improvements that are being made and some workers who are totally dedicated to the veteran community. The new mail system recently instituted by the VA *should* drastically reduce lost mail. It is my understanding mail received at the processing centers is scanned and sent directly to the ROs. I have more confidence in this system and hope to see the effects in expedited claims soon.

I'm hopeful that recent town hall outreach meetings will foster a better working relationship with Veteran Service Officers and give veterans the feeling that their voice is being heard. By simply enabling veterans to voice concerns directly to RO personnel, we can help enhance what has become a tarnished image.

Lastly, allowing the geographically separated VSO access to the RO files through the Stakeholder Enterprise Portal should prove to be a major asset that dramatically improves communication across the entire spectrum.

In the short time I have left, I would like to recognize and commend Ms. Anita Brodsky who has been assigned to work with our county. Ms. Brodsky is responsive, aggressive, and displays a very caring attitude. She always returns phone calls and emails, and seeks the VSO out when she sees anything concerning our clients that may be problematic. I'm comfortable that anything I fax to Ms. Brodsky will receive her immediate attention and confident in the professionalism she projects; the Philadelphia Regional Office should be proud of her hard work and the difference she's making every day.

Additionally, Ms. Jannah Wilder of the Newark Regional Office, who recently assumed duties as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor, is a breath of fresh air. In a very short time, she has established a solid reputation as a person who truly cares and is totally dedicated to her clients.

It is refreshing to work with true professional who will go the extra mile to ensure our veterans receive the benefits they have earned.

In closing, and let me thank you for allowing me to use slightly more than my allotted time; it is my feeling that this is not a situation that will be resolved by throwing money at it, or replacing the Secretary. The problems that exist can be found in the regional office, and their leaders and their mid-level supervisors must be held accountable. Many members of the Regional Office are in positions of leadership, and the time has long passed for them to take the role they've been entrusted with and lead! In today's environment, there's room for just two types of workers in the VA: outstanding and out processing! Thank you for allowing me to provide my thoughts today.