

**STATEMENT OF WILLIE C. CLARK, SR.
DEPUTY UNDER SECRETARY FOR FIELD OPERATIONS
VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION (VBA)
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
BEFORE THE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS**

December 13, 2017

Good morning Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Esty, and Members of the Subcommittee. My name is Willie Clark, Deputy Under Secretary for Field Operations, in the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). I am joined by Beth Murphy, Director of VBA's Compensation Service, and Patricia Murray, Chief Officer, Office of Disability and Medical Assessment, Veterans Health Administration (VHA). I appreciate the opportunity to discuss several of VBA's pre-discharge programs for Servicemembers, including the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES) and Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD). My testimony will also cover improvements to the IDES and BDD programs; Servicemember satisfaction with IDES; and training for employees involved in IDES and BDD claims.

Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES)

On November 28, 2017, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of Defense (DoD) will celebrate the 10th Anniversary of IDES. In 2007, VA and DoD created an integrated disability evaluation process for Servicemembers who are being medically retired or separated from service. This joint process was designed to eliminate the duplicative, time-consuming, and often confusing elements of the

separate and consecutive disability processes within VA and DoD. In fiscal year (FY) 2017, more than 22,000 Servicemembers were enrolled in the IDES program.

IDES provides a single set of disability examinations and a single-source disability rating that are used by both departments in executing their respective responsibilities – eliminating the duplicate medical examination and rating determinations within DoD and within VA processes. The joint VA and DoD partnership through IDES has resulted in more consistent disability ratings, faster decisions, and more timely delivery of benefits for those personnel being medically retired or separated. Following discharge, VA can deliver disability compensation benefits in the shortest period allowed by law, thus reducing the “benefit gap” that previously existed under the legacy process. The integration of VBA’s Military Service Coordinators (MSCs), disability examinations, and proposed disability ratings into the IDES process prior to separation ensures Servicemembers no longer have to navigate the VA disability compensation system on their own to apply for VA benefits.

As a result of our collaborative efforts, VA and DoD have met the six goals established for IDES. These goals are (1) develop a single set of medical exams used by VA and DoD for disability rating; (2) eliminate the benefits delivery gap from separation to receipt of VA benefits; (3) increase transparency and consistency of the disability evaluations for Servicemembers; (4) reduce the combined processing time; (5) develop a less complex and non-adversarial process; and (6) provide a seamless transition of benefits and health care for separating Servicemembers through IDES.

VA is responsible for four core IDES process steps: claim development, medical examination, proposed rating, and benefit notification. For the combined four core

steps, VA's average processing time in September 2017 was 81 days, a 102-day improvement from the last time we testified on the IDES program in May 2014, and 19 days better than the VA target of 100 days. In addition, VBA awarded benefits within an average of 26 days of discharge, under our IDES timeliness goal of 30 days.

DoD provides Servicemembers with IDES customer service satisfaction surveys when they separate. DoD publishes the results on a semi-annual basis, which includes VBA MSC customer satisfaction. At the end of June 2017, customer satisfaction with the overall IDES program was 93 percent and with MSCs was 89 percent.

VA continues to collaborate with DoD on ways to improve IDES execution, while remaining focused on meeting timeliness standards. Our continued partnership with DoD is critical. VA and DoD are committed to supporting our Nation's wounded, ill, and injured Servicemembers through the IDES process.

Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD)

Since 1995 when the BDD pilot started, the BDD and Quick Start programs have provided transitional assistance to separating or retiring Servicemembers and engaged Servicemembers in the claims process prior to discharge. VBA's goal is to ensure that each Servicemember separating from active duty and who wishes to file a claim with VA for service-connected disability benefits receives the upfront and timely assistance in doing so. Just as IDES provides Servicemembers, who are facing medical discharge, with the opportunity to initiate a claim for disability compensation benefits, the program has also provided this opportunity to Servicemembers who are transitioning via traditional or "non-medical" separation.

In FY 2017, VBA significantly improved BDD production and timeliness, completing over 32,000 claims in an average of 90 days, compared to approximately 29,000 claims in 127 days in FY 2016. VBA also completed over 25,000 Quick Start claims in an average of 109 days in FY 2017.

VA is dedicated to ensuring that Veterans get the benefits they have earned and deserve as quickly and accurately as possible. As a result, VA has redesigned its pre-discharge program to enable Servicemembers to receive disability benefit decisions, in most cases, the day after their discharge. The redesigned program went into effect October 1, 2017. Since then, pre-discharge claims are distributed through the National Work Queue to all VBA regional offices. Prior to this change the claims were distributed only to the rating activity sites that were processing these types of claims. The new modifications to the existing BDD program include changing the filing deadline to 90 days, rather than 60 days, in order to enable VBA to schedule and complete all of the medical examinations that are necessary to prepare the disability compensation claim decision prior to the Servicemember's discharge from military service. As part of the redesign, VBA discontinued the Quick Start program and instead will fill the gap by utilizing the new Decision Ready Claim program in addition to the Fully Developed Claim or traditional claim processes as appropriate after separation. We continue to work in concert with our Veterans Service Organization (VSO) partners on the pre-discharge program. VSOs regularly collaborate with our MSCs on various military bases, in order to facilitate Servicemembers' initial claims submission.

Training

VBA provides substantial training for all employees involved in the processing of claims, including pre-discharge claims. VBA's Challenge Training program provides the basic technical skills to process claims in a blended learning format that includes both classroom and practical application. Ongoing technical training is also required each year.

In September 2017, BDD redesign training was provided to MSCs, and VBA plans to conduct a comprehensive MSC training event in FY 2018. In October 2017, VBA conducted focused training on the new redesigned BDD program for claims processors.

Conclusion

VA remains committed to supporting our Nation's Servicemembers through improvements in pre-discharge programs. VA believes its continued enhancements are critical to program success in delivering the benefits and services our Servicemembers and future Veterans deserve.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. We would be pleased to respond to questions you or other Members may have.