

**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICERS**



ORAL TESTIMONY FOR THE RECORD
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTY VETERAN SERVICE OFFICERS
FOR THE
HOUSE VETERANS' AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE ON
DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS (DAMA)

ON

JUNE 26TH, 2024

Presented by

Mr. Herman Breuer

Policy Director, National Association of County Veterans Service Officers

Director, Veterans Service Commission of Trumbull County, Ohio

Chairman Luttrell, Ranking Member Pappas, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers-- commonly referred to as NACVSO-- thanks you for the opportunity to provide testimony before you today, as well as for your time and your dedication to improving the benefits for the men and women who have worn our nation's uniform.

I am here today to bring to your attention some opportunities for refinement as it pertains to the claim adjudication process. As you are all aware-- and I am happy to attest-- the VA Claim process has been significantly improved with the implementation of the National Work Queue (NWQ), but further efficiency can be achieved by enhancing collaboration between VA representatives and the veterans advocate to expedite the collection of necessary information and evidence.

I am an Army veteran of the Iraq War, wounded by an IED in March 2004. My personal experience with VA came at a time when documents were reviewed on paper rather than electronically. The initial development of my own claim took approximately 14 months, primarily due to the delays caused by the location of my paper medical records with the Pennsylvania Army National Guard.

A year after returning home, I became a Veteran Service Officer. Delays continued in the disability process and were evident, particularly during the development phase. At that time, the VA would issue a development letter called a VCAA Notice Response, similar to today's 5103 Notice. This letter allowed veterans to declare whether they had submitted all of their evidence or needed an additional 30 days to gather more. The Regional Office (RO) would only send this letter after opening the mail and beginning to

build the file, a process that often took 60 days. If the veteran did not reply promptly, they would issue yet another letter with a 30-day response time, perpetuating a cycle that could extend the claim development phase up to 12-18 months, that is, an extra year-plus before veterans could even attend a compensation and pension exam.

As an advocate at that time, we submitted claims by US Mail or fax and then waited. These delays were frustrating, especially when telling veterans or their dependents to "be patient," many of whom had just returned from Walter Reed where they were literally patients being patient.

The practice of transferring files from busier ROs to less busy ones helped reduce workloads but continued to add delays; the transfer process taking a minimum of 30 days to complete. The National Work Queue (NWQ) was introduced to address these types of issues. While it was initially met with skepticism from advocates who feared losing the "personal touch" of knowing the right people in their RO, which can be very helpful to the advocate.

Personally, I welcomed the NWQ. As I fielded hundreds of phone calls each month from veterans and dependents inquiring about their claim status, the NWQ, combined with the fully developed claim process, led to noticeable reductions in wait times.

Now that the NWQ has been the standard operating procedure for at least eight years, we can provide an honest assessment: the NWQ system is solid improvement, but I know we can make it better. To optimize this system, it is crucial to truly partner with the advocates on the ground. If a Veterans Service Representative (VSR) or a Rating Veterans Service Representative (RVSR) sees that a claim requires additional information or

evidence, they should first work together with the veteran and then with the veteran's accredited representative to obtain that information expediently, currently a phone call will or email will be sent to the veteran alone, and if they don't respond immediately, the claim is returned back to the NWQ for an additional 30 days, in the past VA was shuffling paper and files manually, today the shuffle still occurs, but digitally, seeing this happen as an advocate can be frustrating. Unfortunately, there are incentives in the current system to kick the claim back to the NWQ because there are no risks to following the procedure to the letter. The unfortunate outcome is that this often leads to unnecessary delays in benefits to a veteran who may desperately need them. By adding contact between VSR's, RVSR's and a veterans accredited representative as a required step within the development procedure, we will empower those with the greatest understanding of the claim to collaborate on behalf of the veteran. This will also discourage delays in claim development, all while adding that "personal touch" to the NWQ that detractors were initially so worried about.

In conclusion, while the NWQ has brought many improvements, fostering a collaborative relationship between VA and veteran advocates will further enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the claim process, minimizing delays, and ensuring that veterans receive the benefits they deserve in the timeliest manner possible.

Chairman, Ranking Member, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to share our input from the field regarding the issues before the panel today. We look forward to our continued work together and would be happy to take any questions for the record. Thank you.