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DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE**

July 23, 2024

Good morning, Chairman Luttrell, Ranking Member Pappas, and Members of the Subcommittee. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the efficacy of VA's quality assurance and training programs, ensuring accurate decisions for Veterans' and survivors' claims. Joining me today are Mr. Kenneth Smith, Assistant Deputy Under Secretary for Field Operations, and Ms. Kristina Messenger, Deputy Executive Director, Operations, Compensation Service.

VA is committed to providing outstanding customer service to all Veterans, their families, and their survivors. Part of this is our commitment to providing high quality claims decisions and ensuring our workforce is thoroughly trained to process all types of benefits claims. Today I will focus my testimony on the quality assurance and training programs for VBA's disability compensation, pension, survivor, and appeals programs. As of May 2024, VBA's Rating Issue Based Quality was 92.4%, with a performance goal of 96% for FY 24 and Non-Rating Claim Based Quality was 89.3%. While VA believes we still can improve claims quality, we have demonstrated great strides in our quality assurance and training programs.

Quality Assurance

VBA has a steadfast commitment to making accurate claims decisions for our Veterans and survivors. From July to September 2020, the VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) conducted reviews of various components of VBA's quality assurance programs. In response, VBA implemented multiple programs and improvements to our quality assurance efforts.¹ We continue to work collaboratively with our oversight partners to strengthen our programs. VBA's robust quality programs hold employees, regional offices (RO), and program offices accountable for quality claims decisions for our Nation's Veterans and survivors, while also promoting continuous learning and performance improvement for our staff. VBA has continued robust quality review programs that hold employees, regional offices (RO), and program offices accountable for quality claims decisions for our Nation's Veterans and survivors, while also promoting continuous learning and performance improvement for our staff.

VBA develops and provides several reports aimed at providing stakeholders insights into the quality of VBA claims processing and to VBA leadership and decision-making personnel on error category trends, quality review workload, and accuracy over

¹ [VAOIG-20-00049-122.pdf](#)

time. VBA's robust reporting and evaluation of data allows VBA to quickly identify quality deficiencies and to inform training needs.

VBA's official reporting metric for claims processing accuracy is through its national Systematic Technical Accuracy Reviews (STAR) program. Under this quality review program, VBA measures quality on decisions provided to our customers and categorizes errors dependent on whether they impact benefit entitlement or not. Benefit entitlement errors result in overpayments or underpayments, may violate due process rights, or could impact the outcome of the claim. VBA also identifies non-benefit entitlement errors as those that do not rise to the level of a benefit-entitlement error or impact the decision for process improvement. These are not included in VBA's STAR error rate because of their procedural nature, but they are used to drive improvements to the claims process through the identification of system enhancements, In-Process Review (IPR) projects, and new or improved job aids.

VBA uses data quality to hold individuals, program offices, and VBA accountable for identifying improvements to policy, procedures, and information technology systems, as well as developing training to assist employees. VBA constantly strives to identify the most effective ways to improve quality as is explained below.

There are three primary programs VBA uses to audit claims quality. First, VBA's STAR program audits quality at the national level, which is focused on reviewing claims that have been fully completed. At the local level, Individual Quality Reviews (IQR) and IPRs are focused on individual employees and actions they have taken on a particular part of a claim. Quality is measured differently between the STAR and IQR programs, but they are each geared to ensure correct decisions are being made.

Systematic Technical Accuracy Reviews

The national STAR program measures quality through an end-to-end review of completed rating and non-rating claims. VBA Central Office Quality Assurance (QA) Staff complete STAR reviews and use them to identify error trends for feedback to the field and to drive training and process improvements to ensure Veterans and survivors receive the benefits they have earned and deserve. Under the STAR program, VBA's Performance Analysis & Integrity (PA&I) Office randomly selects claims throughout the month, and those claims are loaded into the Quality Management System (QMS), VBA's official national-level quality system of record for review. PA&I determines the RO sample sizes using a statistical formula that considers both historical accuracy and workload values. Substantive elements reviewed include ensuring all issues have been addressed, validating that VA's duty to assist and other applicable regulations for complete development have been satisfied, and that decisions, evaluations, effective dates, and payment rates are all correct. QA also checks for procedural deficiencies, including notification errors, administrative or internal control errors. Claims with errors are returned to the ROs where the errors were made and must be corrected or formally disputed within 30 business days. The identified employee responsible for the error receives a notification that there is an error which needs correcting. A copy of this

notification is also sent to the employee's supervisor. If an employee is not identified in the STAR review, ROs must determine the responsible employee for corrective action. These claims are retained at the RO and not recalled by VBA's National Work Queue (NWQ) until the error correction has been initiated and will be returned to the RO based on capacity when the next action is required.

Individual Quality Reviews

IQRs are a review of an individual claims processor's work at key points in the claims process. RO Quality Review Teams (QRT) complete all IQRs against a national quality checklist and are randomly assigned throughout the country to QRT members based on their designated skill sets. On average, QRT teams review between three and five randomly selected claims per month for each employee depending on their position type. Reviews during this process may occur while the claim is still pending or has recently been completed, allowing more immediate feedback to employees on the quality of their work. VA's IQR process is the formal measure for accountability using statistically-sound methods that provide the benefit of the doubt to the employee. To ensure fairness to the employee while also ensuring timely correction of identified errors, the employee has 5 business days to express disagreement or to correct the error.

In-Process Reviews

An IPR is a specialized review designed to correct deficiencies identified during the claims process and identify training opportunities. IPRs are designed to be a "quick touch" review with an emphasis on identifying specific error trends. Unlike IQR, an IPR is not used for formal evaluation of individual employee performance. The QRT member does not complete a full "end to end" review of the entire claim but instead limits the review to the basic information needed to determine whether the action the employee carried out was complete and correct under the appropriate IPR checklist. Employees have 5 business days to correct an error. Recent IPR topics include the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022 reviews, Federal records, disability conditions due to Military Sexual Trauma (MST), and Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) processing.

Special Focused Reviews

As another mechanism in its QA portfolio, VBA uses Special Focused Reviews (SFR) to do a deep dive review on targeted areas of claims processing. These may be based on error trends, Veteran feedback, Office of the Inspector General (OIG) reports, or significant changes in policy and procedure. SFRs assist QA with ensuring accuracy by identifying inconsistencies so that timely feedback is disseminated, and training needs are met. For example, in fiscal year (FY) 2024, VBA completed SFRs on claims denials for posttraumatic stress disorder due to MST (recurring annual review), PACT Act claims, accrued benefits processing, self-authorization, and processing of claims for incarcerated Veterans. These reviews may also drive updated employee training

materials, procedures manual edits, creation of tools for claims processors, and system updates. Like IPRs, SFRs are not used to formally evaluate any individual employee's performance.

At the start of FY 2023, to illustrate VBA's commitment to continue improving quality for all VBA program offices, the Office of Policy and Oversight (OPO) established an overarching SFR program across VBA's business lines. While individual program offices conducted SFRs previously, OPO's SFR program facilitates a consistent method to measure the efficacy and validity of recent actions taken and are completed quarterly by each program office. As of July 5, 2024, OPO offices have completed 58 SFRs on topics ranging from disability examination clarification requests to Camp Lejeune Contaminated Water claims processing. In addition to immediate corrective actions taken to improve policies, processes, and performance, the program offices have completed 138 recommendations (as of July 5, 2024).²

Quality Review Teams

QRTs are responsible for promoting consistency across all decisions VBA makes through quality reviews, mentoring, and other quality-related activities. As noted earlier in this testimony, QRTs are located at each RO and may be specialized in their expertise; however, reviews are distributed across the country via VBA's QMS to ensure fairness of reviews.

Compensation Service QA conducts training for newly promoted QRT members twice per fiscal year. The training centers around their role as a quality review specialist. Along with initial training, in May 2024 Compensation Service provided refresher training to current QRT members on topics such as IQR checklist principles, the standards of an error, how to write clear and succinct error narratives, and error trend analysis and training.

VBA scales its QRT staffing to ensure that individual employee work is reviewed timely, and quality review specialists can provide appropriate mentoring to claims processors. From October 1, 2021, to June 1, 2024, VBA has onboarded 15,414 claims processors—4,912 were onboarded during FY 2022, and 10,502 were onboarded from the start of FY 2023 to June 1, 2024. The change in onboard staff improves VBA's claim processing potential, with approximately 61.2% more onboard claims processors than FY 2021 levels. To keep up with this unprecedented increase in claims processing staffing and to provide mentoring support through a 13- or 26-week informal assessment period, VBA added 254 new quality review professionals. VBA continues to monitor QRT staffing levels following this increase, and the results demonstrate more timely quality reviews and improved access to mentors.

Quality Methodology

² OPO SFR data encompasses all business lines and program offices under OPO's purview.

During FY 2015, VBA revised its quality assurance program to reflect industry-standard best practices in statistical sampling and estimation. VBA's quality assurance program is designed to provide quality estimates within a 5% margin of error with a 95% confidence level for every 12 months of reviews.³

VBA estimates claims processing accuracy for each RO and the entire Nation. Within each RO, estimates are provided for different types of workloads, including compensation rating (i.e., decisions) and compensation authorization (i.e., payments). Each RO and workload type combination is treated as a separate population, from which a sample is drawn independently. The sample design is a systematic random sample, where the sample is by RO and time-period. After a VA contractor, MITRE, conducted a study in FY 2019 recommending proportional allocation of disability compensation claims, VBA made the decision to maintain the stratification by RO but to allow the individual RO margin of error to widen to 7.5%. This change allows VBA to report its national accuracy with a high degree of reliability and margin of error of less than 1.0%.

Quality Management System

QMS is the official system of record for the program offices discussed in this testimony to complete and track quality reviews at the local and national levels. VBA launched this system in 2017 to ensure quality reviews could be managed throughout the country and to provide oversight and tracking of reviews. QMS also allows users to build reports at the national, RO, and team levels, and future enhancements will tie in employee data, such as the level of experience. During a multi-prong review of VBA's Compensation Service Quality Assurance Portfolio in 2019 and 2020, OIG identified QMS as a best practice and recommended that employee error reviews be routed and conducted at an RO other than where the employee works, for objectivity and internal control purposes.⁴ Since all reviews are completed in QMS, data can be easily tracked for feedback and accountability.

Additional Oversight

To assess and monitor performance at the local level, each program office conducts oversight visits at claims processing centers throughout the country. This includes Veterans Service Centers, Benefit Eligibility Support Teams, the MST Operations Center, Pension Management Centers, and Decision Review Operations Centers.

All ROs are also required to complete an annual review of their local quality in a Strategic Oversight and Analysis Review (SOAR). SOARs are an internal control self-audit mechanism for operational analysis and improvement. Some of the primary SOAR objectives are to assess the effectiveness and adherence to operational procedures, identify problems and recommend corrective actions, and identify operational

³ [VBA Quality Assurance Sampling Methodology.](#)

⁴ [VA OIG Report 19-07054-174, Deficiencies in the Quality Review Team Program.](#)

procedures and oversight that are not currently included as part of the station workload management plan. During all site visits, the Quality SOARs are reviewed to ensure they contain in-depth analysis supported by data, identify areas that need improvement and/or best practices, include appropriate recommendations for areas needing improvement, use a recommendation log, and fully comply with the appropriate procedural manual.

Deferrals

Outside of formal quality assessment processes, VBA requires decision-making employees to review work performed at earlier stages of the claims process and determine if all necessary actions and evidence gathering to support the Veteran's claim have been completed. If they have not, these employees have a tool called a deferral that is used to send the claim back to an earlier stage for additional work. The deferral process has existed since VBA's paper claims processing days but now leverages two distinct categories of deferrals to ensure non-punitive feedback on defects and the greatest efficiency through VBA's NWQ routing logic.

Avoidable deferrals are those that should have been preventable by the prior employee and are frequently missed actions to collect necessary evidence. These deferrals are routed by NWQ back to the prior station that completed the work, regardless of the volume of work currently at that station, to ensure awareness of the defect and ensure prompt correction. ROs are encouraged to use automated rules to route avoidable deferrals back to the prior employee as well. NWQ provides continued training to front line supervisors on local rule functionality so ROs can determine the best way to use automated rules for local deferral management. Due to rapid hiring in FY 2023, avoidable deferrals doubled from FY 2022 to FY 2023. Through May 2024, VBA has had 6.1 fewer avoidable deferrals per claims processor, or an 18.2% improvement compared to the same time in FY 2023 as new staff become more experienced. VBA remains committed to continued improvements to our process and to fully supporting our employees with the resources needed.

In FY 2024, VBA has worked to improve avoidable deferral routing and ensure that employees receive claims back for correction, just as they would for a formal error. The Veterans Benefits Management System's RO Work Queue functionality allows ROs to create automated rules to govern avoidable deferrals routing. RO managers can route avoidable deferrals back to the prior employee through the daily automated NWQ distribution. This functionality represents a best practice. To enhance claims distribution efficiency and timeliness of decisions, NWQ provided national training to more than 600 claims processing managers in August 2023 to cover local rules and deferral routing. This content has been incorporated into ongoing Supervisory Workload Management Training (SWMT) launched in February 2024, which provides training to new supervisors in workload management principles and best practices for local rules and claims routing.

Unavoidable deferrals are those that may not have been preventable, such as those that result from evidence or correspondence received following the prior employee's action. These claims are distributed by NWQ with all others requiring further development, with first preference for the prior RO. However, because these deferrals do not represent a defect in workmanship, they are routed with a higher priority for timely completion rather than strictly to the prior RO and employee who worked the claim.

At the direction of the Under Secretary for Benefits in June 2023, VBA commissioned a "Red Team" to scrutinize the deferral process as well as NWQ's ability to reduce rework and improve quality. Comprised of RO Directors, Division Managers, NWQ staff, and first-line supervisors, the team validated the core deferral process and recommended improvements for routing of claims back to the prior employee who completed an action, thereby better leveraging claim familiarity and efficiency. The enhancement request from this recommendation has been submitted for action as part of VBA's efforts to modernize and improve NWQ, which is expected to be completed in FY 2025.

Error Trend and Data Sharing

VBA's Compensation Service and Pension & Fiduciary Service conduct monthly calls that are available to all claims processors to communicate updates, trends, and changes for Veterans Service Representatives (VSR), Rating Veterans Service Representatives (RVSR), and QRT members. Topics for the Quality Calls originate from the responsible program office, other business lines/staffs (such as the Office of Business Automation-Production Optimization, Office of Field Operations (OFO), Medical Disability Examination Office, etc.), and the ROs. Quality Calls are published in VA's Talent Management System as locally assigned training for employees with a due date of 30 days after assignment. Quality Calls historically have reached a monthly audience of over 8,000 employees. Along with monthly Quality Calls, there are quarterly calls specific to QRTs on error trends, IQR checklist updates, and issues Ros bring up that impact QRTs.

Additionally, VBA's Office of Administrative Review manages a Feedback Loop, which is a partnership between VBA and the Board of Veterans' Appeals (Board) to provide a direct line for clarification of Board decisions and remands. In the past 4 years, VBA and the Board collaborated on approximately 500 requests for clarification and guidance in effectuating Board decisions and remands.

Accountability Measures

The quality of work VBA employees perform is an integral element of leadership performance metrics. Historically, VBA held its RO Directors responsible for quality as determined by the STAR program. Starting in FY 2024, VBA implemented a GAO recommendation to transition its quality accountability from the STAR-based method—which attributes any error in the entire claim process to the RO who completed work on

the claim—to an IQR method, which assesses accuracy of the discrete actions of each employee.⁵ In the IQR framework, RO leadership is accountable for the sum of IQR accuracy for all claims processors at that RO. This change incentivizes all RO personnel, from the claims processor, to the first line coach, to the division leadership, and to the RO Director to review and improve quality of work performed by each employee. Failure to meet the performance standards can result in a negative personnel action. However, before initiating any negative personnel action, ROs can provide additional targeted training, mentoring, and assistance to the employee based on error trends. Fairness in quality assessments is a core organizational value. Performance assessments provide the benefit of the doubt to the employee to prevent a single month's review from having an outsized effect on a full year performance assessment, while ensuring accountability when error trends are identified.

Oversight of Quality for Automation

In December 2021, VBA's Office of Automated Benefits Delivery (ABD) initiated Automation Decision Support (ADS) technology and developed a robust quality program to assess its accuracy. Quality of the ADS tools are measured from two lenses— an Independent, Verification, and Validation vendor is responsible for ensuring technology is functioning as intended and an internal QA team that conducts reviews on claims processed through automation to verify the technology is accurately determining outcomes based on established policies and procedures. This approach provides a holistic view of ADS technology ensuring the logic is driving the correct automation outcomes and also consistently populating the Automated Review Summary Document in accordance with requirements. ABD leadership uses both assessments to determine when conditions are ready for national deployment.

To foster and facilitate changes and enhancements to the claims processing systems, ABD uses human-centered design feedback sessions with claims processors, both virtually and in-person, to develop and improve automation training materials and communication products. ABD leverages change management techniques offering bi-weekly ADS training sessions to assist claims processors and RO managers and to discuss automation utilization, challenges, and successes. ABD is also working to expand ADS technology to address system compliance errors; utilizing automation tools to ensure the Veteran's electronic records are up-to-date and reflect accurate information.

In FY 2024, ABD redesigned its internal intranet website, allowing claims processors to quickly locate job aids, training materials, instructional videos, and release notes to automation updates. Within this site, claims processors have access to feedback tools to submit their recommendations and questions to further provide ABD with input on how to improve automation in claims processing.

⁵ [Veterans' Disability Benefits: Better Measures Needed to Assess Regional Office Performance in Processing Claims.](#)

Additionally, VBA's Pension and Fiduciary (P&F) Service has oversight of multiple automated programs to include State Plot, First Notice of Death, and the Pension Optimization Initiative. To provide a comprehensive assessment of automation quality, P&F created the Automation Quality Program (AQP), which provides rolling accuracy scores on a monthly, quarterly, and annual basis, using a similar sampling and reporting structure as VA's national STAR program. P&F also conducts frequent Targeted Program Reviews and SFRs for automated P&F claims to identify improvement opportunities and areas of success. Quality findings result in creating and prioritizing enhancements that address the quality gap in existing requirements. As of May 2024, 634 claims have been reviewed in the rolling 12-month AQP score with an accuracy rate of 97.3%.

Training

VBA has invested in robust training programs for both newly appointed and experienced claims processors to enable their success in providing earned benefits to Veterans and their eligible dependents and survivors. VBA continues to assess and is actively working to mature its training programs as part of its broader commitment to being a learning organization.

In alignment with industry best practices, VBA standardized processes for evaluating training programs and systems, promoting consistency with training evaluation requirements, and meeting expectations for training evaluation. This improves information available for employee development action planning, focuses training resources more effectively, promotes data-driven decision-making, and provides world-class service to Veterans, Service members, and beneficiaries as well as Administration employees and representatives. VBA primarily uses the Kirkpatrick model of learning evaluation, which is a widely recognized model for learning evaluation. Additionally, frequent changes to the laws, regulations, policies and procedures that govern claims processor duties requires regular curriculum lifecycle maintenance to address the constantly evolving content creation and revision.

Training for Newly Hired and Promoted Claims Processors

VBA recognizes that training is an essential part of preparing claims processors to accurately process disability claims. As a result, VBA has incorporated training requirements for claims processors on an annual basis. In 2020, VBA established a multi-phase mandatory foundational training program, Virtual and In-Person Progression (VIP) training. VIP is administered to newly assigned VSRs and RVSRs. VIP incorporates a blended learning approach that includes instructor-led web-based training, classroom instruction, hands-on experience using eCase demonstrations (mock claims), and working live claims. This model enables VBA to flex and provide essential training to new claims processor cohorts more frequently and in greater numbers than was possible under the previous foundational training model. Since

FY 2022, VBA has trained over 13,000 VSRs and RVSRs in this model, primarily in support of surge hiring for PACT Act claims processing. As of June 1, 2024, a total of 3,549 students have graduated from VIP in FY 2024.

For newly hired VSRs and RVSRs, once they complete VIP training, the QRT or a more journey-level employee in the same position reviews their claim processing work during an informal assessment (IA) period. VSRs have their work reviewed for 13 weeks and, in the most recent VIP class, averaged 91 claims during the IA period. VBA reviewed 164,601 trainee claims in FY 2022; 241,260 in FY 2023; and 187,405 claims in FY 2024 (as of June 30, 2024). RVSRs have their claims reviewed for a longer period of time (26 weeks) based on the complexity of their position. In the most recent VIP class, RVSRs averaged 89 claims during this timeframe. VBA reviewed 110,672 trainee claims in FY 2022; 239,406 in FY 2023; and 168,964 claims in FY 2024 (as of June 30, 2024).

VBA also collaborates with the Department of Defense to offer the Warrior Training Advancement Course (WARTAC), which is a SkillBridge education and employment opportunity for Wounded Warriors and transitioning Service members who have 180-days or less left in service. This program allows them to complete the VSR/RVSR national-level VBA VIP training program while still on active duty. Successfully completing this training program leads to an employment opportunity at one of 55 VBA ROs around the country.⁶ The duration of the VSR class is 6 weeks, and the duration of the RVSR class is 11 weeks. Since its inception in 2014, WARTAC has expanded to 16 military bases around the world. In this same period, 2,769 transitioning Service members have graduated the WARTAC program, of which 2,098 (79% retention rate) are still employed at VA.

Training for Experienced Claims Processors

The Competency Based Training System (CBTS) is a robust training tool used to identify knowledge and skills gaps to provide the right training to the right employee at the right time. CBTS is assigned to VSRs and RVSRs who have 1 year or more in their position. It is administered on an annual basis and is designed to identify individual training needs or knowledge or skill deficiencies, with follow-on training assigned and tracked. CBTS is designed collaboratively with claims processor subject matter experts, VBA's Human Capital Services (HCS), OFO, and third-party assessment creators. An extensive program of instruction outlining every stage of training curriculum and linkages to specific knowledge, skills, and abilities is used to create the foundation for training needs evaluation that CBTS uses as a framework for assessment modeling.

Mandatory Training

Mandatory training is training which is assigned based on nationally identified trends and potential knowledge or skills gaps that may or may not have been captured in the CBTS diagnostic assessment results on an ad hoc or annual basis. Mandatory

⁶ Excludes Manila

training may also include periodic assessments to gauge claims processors' understanding and assist in creating better training products. Additionally, ROs conduct trend analysis based on the needs of their individual offices and may select additional training to address specific needs. ROs are not limited in the amount of training that can be provided.

VA also provides specialized claims processor training for centralized or special mission claims. Claims such as Traumatic Brain Injury, disability conditions due to MST, and ALS require claims processors to take additional training annually. Specialized processing centers, such as Pension Management Centers and Decision Review Operations Center supplement the national training with their own specialized training.

Professional Development

VBA considers professional development to be another valuable component of training, ensuring employees who are interested in pursuing further opportunities within VA are provided guidance and coaching. VBA's HCS Learning and Development Team provides national programs for future leaders through intensive formal classroom and virtual training, developmental activities, networking, mentoring, and career advising that serves leaders of all levels. NWQ's Red Team also recommended new, in-person SWMT in concert with the existing training provided to new supervisors. Launched in 2024 and taught by experienced RO division and business line leaders, this training provides new supervisors with analytical tools and detailed insights into workload management techniques in NWQ's environment to ensure that this knowledge is passed on and improved over time.

Various ROs have also developed their own professional development programs. As an example, the Waco RO established multiple development programs, targeted at employees from GS-7 through GS-13. Their Mentoring and Organizational Development of Emerging Leaders program commenced in June 2022 and is designed to cultivate the potential of Waco's aspiring leaders. The goal is to sharpen, educate, and model successful leadership skills. The Strategic Thinking by Empowering Exploration into Leadership (STEEL) program is open to employees who are interested in pursuing a supervisory or leadership position in the future. Waco STEEL program's goal is to provide a framework for employees to know themselves; to be able to grow within VA; and to show themselves as an asset to the organization. Finally, the Essential Attributes of Genuine Leadership Engagement program is designed to provide new supervisors with training to develop the leadership and technical skills required to be successful as a VA supervisor.

Collaboration and Modernization

Although VBA has implemented multiple, nationwide employee training programs while training unprecedented numbers of VSRs and RVSRs, VBA has recognized the need to modernize claims processors foundational training. Training modernization efforts are underway and have consisted of District listening sessions, RO division

leadership level input and feedback sessions, and development of a working group to implement changes to the existing VIP program while working towards a modernized foundational training framework that has the employee and their experience at the center. VBA's training modernization aims to provide a world class adult learning experience.

Furthermore, VBA is actively exploring innovative training delivery methods. VBA is continuing to explore and deploy modernized training techniques such as microlessons and videos to ensure that claims processors are well-equipped to address the challenges presented by cases that often involve complex legal and medical questions. Ongoing initiatives include continued competency-based training development, instructional integrity reviews of training content by independent experts, internal collaborations to assess training needs, and establishing a VBA Training Oversight Council. Additionally, VBA has implemented various mechanisms focused on improving quality and training, including formal quality and training huddles, a task force focused on reducing overdevelopment in claims processing, and a quality standdown with a focus on employee wellness.

VA Central Office Quality and Training Huddles

In November 2021, OPO formed the VA Central Office (VACO) Quality Huddle with the intent of sharing quality best practices across the program offices. VBA identified that, although the measures of quality may differ across the business lines, training processes and procedures used may be versatile enough to be applied across VBA. The Quality Huddle also aims to reduce any silos and improve communication throughout VA, achieving goals of trust and innovation as well as improved collaboration and improved quality. Following the success of the Quality Huddle, in June 2023, OPO also established the VACO Training Huddle. By leveraging collective expertise, VA can adapt swiftly to changes in policies or procedures to provide the training that ensures our workforce remains well-equipped to deliver timely and accurate decisions on claims.

Over-Development Reduction Task Force

In FY 2022, OPO established the Over-Development Reduction Task Force (ODRTF) comprised of members across VBA and charged with promoting consistency and quality by analyzing the claims development process and streamlining processes by eliminating unnecessary employee actions. During the first phase, the task force implemented over 30 action items, which included claims processing manual updates, creating and updating training components, enhancements to claims processing systems, updates to VA notification letters, and initiation of several different quality reviews with targeted feedback to field employees. These action items positively impacted claims processing timeliness and quality.

On January 31, 2024, the second phase of ODRTF commenced with a focus on improvement in examination processes, to include: vendor examinations, use of private

disability benefits questionnaires (DBQ) submitted by Veterans, use of a standardized exam scheduling request tool, and effectiveness of automated examination ordering. The task force is exploring opportunities in policy, processes, and technology to eliminate over-development.

Numerous action items have already been initiated for improving the private DBQ submission process, improving guidance to field employees on appropriately requesting examinations and preventing redundancy, and employee training to assist claims processors in scheduling more informed, intentional, and accurate requests for disability exams and medical opinions. During the second phase of the ODRTF, business lines collaborated to implement a Strategic Oversight and Analysis Review of Over development in Claims Processing, which regional offices will be required to complete bi-annually. VBA has also submitted improvements to the Exam Schedule Request tool to alleviate ordering unnecessary exams, and the name of the tool will be updated to Exam Scheduling Assistant. Additionally, VBA sent communication to the field on the acceptance of private DBQs and emphasis to review/weigh the evidence/DBQs of record to decide claims. The second phase of ODRTF is currently working on several large-scale initiatives that will have lasting positive impact on claims processing. For example, on June 4, 2024, VBA provided training on examination requests and the rework process. This training was designed and delivered in direct response to data showing frequent occurrence of exam clarifications required before claims can be decided, for reasons such as incorrect DBQs, missing DBQs, and missing/incomplete medical opinions. This training was presented and made available to claims processors at each regional office, in every district.

As VBA presses forward on these advancements, ODRTF is just one component of our overall commitment to improvement in self-evaluation, training, quality, and overall customer service.

Quality Standdown and Employee Wellness

As part of our larger effort to provide the best possible service to Veterans and survivors, VBA hosted an organizational-wide Quality Standdown and Employee Wellness Day, on June 6, 2024. The effort was intended to meet two important goals—improving the quality of our work across all business lines, from Central Office to the field and improving employee wellness and experience by addressing burnout and mental health. Nearly all of VBA's 34,000 employees participated. The agenda was designed to address the needs of our entire operations, from claims processors to call center agents, and provided a connection between employees through live engagement, small group discussions, and focused communication from VBA leadership to first line supervisors to front line employees.

VBA's Quality Standdown and Employee Wellness Day consisted of nation-wide training that focused on employee wellness and national content provided by program offices to RO employees. The remaining time was customized to address local quality and improvement topics in all divisions. The quality agenda was driven by gaps and/or

concerns identified nationally and locally, and topics addressed identified deficiencies in top categories of error trends, with a focus on promoting claims processing accuracy. The employee wellness agenda addressed employee burnout and focused on overall employee work experience and resiliency. VBA is considering holding additional sessions throughout the year and will leverage the feedback we are currently collecting from our employees and labor partners from last month's event.

Conclusion

VBA remains committed to delivering timely, accurate, and equitable claims decisions to all Veterans, dependents, and survivors—all while providing a world class experience. I hope this testimony provides insight into this commitment. As always, VBA looks forward to the continued oversight Congress provides and the partnership of our stakeholders. Chairman Luttrell, Ranking Member Pappas, this concludes my testimony. My colleagues and I are happy to respond to any questions you or the Subcommittee may have.