



**COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON SOCIAL SECURITY  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**

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ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER  
FOR THE OFFICE OF DISABILITY POLICY  
SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION**

Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Larson, and Members of the Subcommittee:

## **Introduction**

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you about our efforts to support our nation's Veterans. I am Gina Clemons, Associate Commissioner for the Office of Disability Policy at the Social Security Administration (SSA). As an Army Veteran myself, I appreciate this opportunity to discuss the ways we help the men and women who have served our country. Before I begin, I want to give special thanks to Chairman Johnson for his 29 years of dedicated service to our country in the U.S. Air Force. I would also like to thank all of the members of this subcommittee for their ongoing support of our Veterans.

Today, I want to share with you an overview of the services SSA provides to the public, the processes SSA has implemented to help our Wounded Warriors and other Veterans, SSA's efforts to reach out and help our nation's Veterans, and our partnerships with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of Defense (DoD).

## **Services We Provide to the Public**

We administer the Old-Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance (OASDI) program, commonly referred to as "Social Security." Individuals earn coverage for Social Security retirement, survivors, and disability benefits by working and paying Social Security taxes on their earnings. Payroll tax revenues fund the Social Security program. We also administer the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program, which provides monthly payments to people with limited income and resources who are aged, blind, or disabled. Adults and children under age 18 can receive payments based on disability or blindness. General tax revenues fund the SSI program.

Few government agencies touch the lives of as many people as we do. Social Security pays monthly OASDI benefits to approximately 62 million individuals. During fiscal year (FY) 2017, we paid about \$934 billion to Social Security beneficiaries. We continue to be mission-focused and mission-driven as we serve millions of Americans who need services from us, including our nation's Veterans.

## **Services We Provide to Wounded Warriors and Veterans**

Social Security coverage protects all Americans. After the September 11, 2001 attack on the United States, many members of the armed forces were called to active duty. While defending our country, scores of our active duty Service members sustained severe physical and mental impairments that changed their lives. Many of these Service members qualify for Social Security disability benefits. We are proud of the help we provide these Wounded Warriors and other Service members, and Veterans through our disability programs as well as our commitment and success in hiring and retaining Veterans.

## *Outreach to Wounded Warriors and Veterans*

Our disability programs can play a crucial role in aiding Wounded Warriors and other Service members and Veterans with disabilities only if they are aware of the programs and able to use them. Therefore, we employ a variety of outreach measures; our partnerships with the DoD and the VA have strengthened these efforts. For example, our field office employees visit military and VA hospitals across the country. These employees perform various tasks for Service members and Veterans, including screening potential disability applicants to see if they meet the Wounded Warrior status, taking claims and scheduling appointments, thereby providing faster and more convenient service to our service men and women. I was able to witness first-hand the appreciation for these services by Service members and their families having had the privilege to participate in this initiative with the Silver Spring, Maryland Field Office working with Wounded Warriors at the Walter Reed Military Medical Center. Since the time I had this opportunity, further advancements allow us to conduct interviews and take disability claims by video conference.

As further example of the benefits of our collaborative efforts, through our agreement with the U.S. Army Warrior Transition Command, Army Warrior advocates provide information about our process to Wounded Warriors or their families within two weeks of that Wounded Warrior's arrival at a military treatment facility. We also established an agreement with the Navy's Physical Evaluation Board Liaison Officers (PEBLOs); under the agreement, the PEBLOs present information about our Wounded Warrior process to Marines and Sailors during transition briefings. Similarly, VA distributes our Wounded Warrior guide at its sites.

We also reach out to Service members and Veterans through our nationwide network of public affairs specialists. This network contacts the military community as well as local newspapers, community organizations, banks, and TV stations to publicize our role and commitment to Service members and Veterans. They also conduct presentations at national and local events. In FY 2017, our public affairs specialists participated in more than 260 events for Wounded Warriors and Veterans with a total estimated audience of 70,000 people.

In addition to our outreach efforts, we have several information sources, such as a dedicated website for Wounded Warriors and other Service members and Veterans. The website, [www.ssa.gov/people/veterans/](http://www.ssa.gov/people/veterans/), includes specific information for Wounded Warriors and Veterans, including a link to our guide that explains our disability program and expedited filing process for Wounded Warriors and Veterans who have a VA benefit rating of 100 percent Permanent and Total (P&T). The website also contains information for all Service members, Veterans, and family members, with answers to frequently asked questions and other helpful websites, including links to several VA and DoD websites.

### **Expedited Processing**

We work closely with DoD and VA to identify ways to streamline and expedite processes to support our Service members and Veterans. In 2005, we began providing expedited processing of filed disability claims for Wounded Warriors—defined as any current or former Service Member who sustained an illness, injury, or wound while on active duty on or after October 1,

2001—regardless of where or how the injury occurred. On March 17, 2014, we started expediting the claims for Veterans who filed for SSA disability and had a VA compensation rating of 100 percent P&T using a similar process.

Through automated data exchanges we have with DoD (Wounded Warriors) and VA (100 percent P&T), we are able to automatically add an indicator to our records. With this indicator, when a Wounded Warrior or Veteran with a 100 percent P&T rating applies for our disability programs, the claims specialist receives a prompt and attempts to take the claim at this initial point of contact. If the person does not have time or the information they need, we schedule an appointment within three days to take the claim. A flag is automatically then added to the Wounded Warrior or 100 percent P&T claim and the claim moves to the front of the line through all levels of review.

As of December 29, 2017, we have processed 172,272 Wounded Warrior claims at the initial level and 31,974 claims for Veterans with a 100 percent P&T rating. On average, in FY 2017 it took us roughly seven fewer days to process Wounded Warrior claims at the initial level and five fewer days to process a 100 percent P&T claim. At the appeals level, in FY 2017, the average processing times (APT) for closed hearing cases are 237 days for Military Casualty/Wounded Warrior and 297 for 100 percent P&T disability, compared to an overall APT of 605 days.

However, it is not enough to decide Wounded Warrior claims quickly. We must also decide them accurately and we have taken several steps to help our State disability adjudicators. For example, in recent years we have updated our Listings of Impairments to provide clear information on two significant war injuries – traumatic brain injury (TBI) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). We have provided our adjudicators with supportive written and video training that addresses how to recognize and assess the symptoms of these conditions.

Moreover, we continue to work with our Veteran advocates, medical experts, and the VA to ensure we are providing helpful information to our adjudicators. For example, we are currently working on a Continuing Medical Education (CME) video on recognizing the signs and symptoms of TBI and a PTSD fact sheet to assist our adjudicators in understanding the variations in how and when symptoms of PTSD may manifest.

Finally, before we identify a Wounded Warrior claim, the Service member may have returned to work. If that Service member met our definition of disability prior to returning to work, he or she may be eligible to receive disability benefits during that period. We call this period a closed period of disability, and provide extensive training on when to consider the possibility of awarding it in Wounded Warrior claims so that Service members do not lose benefits to which they are entitled.

### **Hiring Veterans at SSA**

Not all of our efforts solely focus on those Veterans who cannot work. We recognize that the transition to civilian life can be difficult and finding employment can be particularly daunting. We are proud of our success in recruiting, supporting, and retaining Veterans. Through their military service, Veterans have developed strong interpersonal skills, an ability to learn new

skills and concepts, flexibility in working in teams or independently, an ability to work efficiently and diligently in a fast-paced environment; they also get things done. These attributes make them a perfect fit for our agency. Quite simply, hiring Veterans is a smart practice.

We seek Veteran job applicants through a number of recruitment efforts. In FY 2017, we participated in 212 recruitment fairs, including 100 held at military bases and Veteran organizations. We maintain a database of Veteran résumés, which facilitates referring highly skilled veteran candidates to hiring officials nationwide for consideration of employment opportunities.

We utilize both military specific recruitment efforts and internship programs, such as Non Paid Work Experience Program and Operation Warfighter, to attract Veterans. We developed new Veteran-focused recruitment materials to market SSA career opportunities within the Veteran community and held regular meetings with our National Recruitment Cadre to share best practices and collaborate on consistency of our marketing efforts to brand SSA as an employer of choice.

In FY 2017, we hired 2,367 new employees of which 769 were Veterans and 469 were disabled Veterans. Of these Veterans, 441 were hired through special hiring authorities, such as Appointments for Veterans with a disability rating of 30 percent or more, Schedule A, Veterans Employment Opportunities Act of 1998 (VEOA), and Veterans Recruitment Appointment Authority (VRA).

Our interest in Veteran applicants does not end once we hire them. We also strive to create a workplace that supports our Veteran employees and is sensitive to their needs. For example, we provide a Veteran-specific training video for managers and Human Resources Specialists. This training video covers a variety of topics such as developmental programs for our Veteran employees, Veteran-focused employee services, and Veteran-focused benefits. Our Veteran employees can readily access Veteran-related information on our Veterans Employee Terminal website. The website also provides a variety of materials to educate our managers about the effects of TBI and PTSD and agency policies, programs, and career resources for Veteran employees and managers. Through our Veterans and Military Affairs Advisory Council, Veteran employees can receive new employee orientation and ongoing support.

### **Partnerships with VA and DoD**

As I stated, supporting our nation's Veterans is an agency commitment—one shared by our Federal partners. Many of our efforts are brought about through the collaborative work with our partners, such as VA and DoD. We greatly value our mutually beneficial partnerships; they present effective and efficient opportunities to ensure that the nation's Service members and Veterans with disabilities receive all of the benefits and services that they deserve.

In September 2009, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) published a report on improving Wounded Warriors' access to benefits<sup>1</sup>. Subsequently, we worked with the DoD and VA to develop a joint plan of action to address the report's recommendation. As documented in the final joint plan of action report provided to this Subcommittee and the Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Personnel in April 2017, working together we improved communication, collaboration, and medical information sharing. Following are just a few additional highlights resulting from this productive partnership.

### ***Our Role in the Disability Compensation Claims Process***

As you know, VA has a disability compensation claims process that is separate and distinct from the disability programs that we administer. The Social Security Act defines disability as the inability to engage in any substantial gainful activity due to a physical or mental impairment that has lasted or is expected to last at least one year or to result in death. In contrast, VA provides disability compensation to Veterans based on the severity of disabilities resulting from injuries or diseases incurred while on active military service, or were made worse by active military service.

To process the claims it receives, VA requests medical records from us when VA disability compensation claimants indicate that they have also filed for, or are receiving, Social Security Disability Insurance or SSI benefits. In FY 2017, we received 41,520 requests for medical evidence from VA. We place a high priority on the requests we receive from VA and work very hard on responding to them within five business days.

We have taken several steps to ensure that we continue to respond timely to VA's requests. We centralized our process in our National Records Center (NRC) in Independence, Missouri. The NRC receives all requests and provides all records. By completely centralizing our process, we have greater control over these requests and ensure timely responses to all of them.

### ***Improved Medical Information Sharing***

VA and DoD also helps provide information to administer our program. Effective October 11, 2016, we began receiving medical documentation from the VA through the nationwide electronic data exchange, commonly known as health IT. This new health IT process helps us make disability determinations more expeditiously for all Veterans and their family members who apply for disability benefits by reducing the time it takes to receive medical records electronically from all VA facilities. As of January 23, 2018, we received 71,882 VA-held medical records via health IT. Additionally, effective November 23, 2015, we implemented this same process with DoD. Since that time we received 59,402 DoD-held medical records via health IT.

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<sup>1</sup> GAO, "Social Security Disability: Additional Outreach and Collaboration on Sharing Medical Records Would Improve Wounded Warriors' Access to Benefits" (GAO-09-762)

While we are no longer working under a joint plan of action, we continue to participate in leadership and staff-level meetings regularly to share information and collaborate. For example, quarterly we meet with the VA to discuss data sharing agreements, policy considerations, and other best practices and lessons learned. Recently, we were able to work with the VA to enhance our data sharing agreements. Such agreements allow us to provide income information to assist VA in deciding eligibility for its pension program. Additionally, VA utilizes death data maintained by SSA to help VA meet the requirements of Do Not Pay, which reduces improper Government payments by eliminating payment error, waste, fraud, and abuse. These improvements provided the opportunity for more effective use of data within the VA to serve Veterans. Our ongoing communication and collaboration with all of our Federal partners will enable us to continue to enhance our serves to our Wounded Warriors and other Service members and Veterans.

### **Conclusion**

Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Larson, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to describe the ways we support the men and women like you who have served our nation. Brave men and women have always put their lives on the line to protect this country.

Through the programs and services we provide, it is our duty to show our appreciation and support for their sacrifices. We are proud of our ongoing partnerships and processes to help Wounded Warriors and other Service members and Veterans. By working together, we continue to provide the high quality service that our military men and women deserve. Again, thank you for all you have done.

I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.