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VA Moves Towards a Paperless System

By Rick Stewart, Arapahoe County Veteran Service Officer

With an aging veteran population and increasing numbers of veterans from current wars, the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs is facing a skyrocketing number of claims for VA benefits. As a result, claims are backlogging at the VA in record numbers.

Since 2009, the claim backlog has ballooned by 108,000 to reach nearly one million. The VA often defines backlog as claims that are over 125 days old. The paperwork involved with these claims is staggering.

In some VA offices, such as the Poff Federal Building in Roanoke, Virginia, the weight of overloaded filing cabinets loaded with paper associated with claims was at risk of causing structural damage to the building. Veterans service organizations that help veterans through the claim process are also feeling the burden of storing and processing paperwork.

On July 2, 2010, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki announced plans to develop a fully automated, online system for handling veterans' disability claims. This new system is part of VA's modernization of the end-to-end processing workflow.

The initiative will involve scanning in forms, medical records and evidence, and moving to electronic files that people in several locations can view simultaneously. It will also allow a veteran to file an entire disability claim online and check claim status, and is expected to greatly speed up the processing time for claims.

"This new program accelerates our effort to eliminate the claim backlog through automation and modernization of our systems," said Secretary Shinseki.

This new system is being funded by the VA Innovation Initiative. Secretary Shinseki has also stated that he wants the VA to become the veterans advocate and no longer seen as the veterans adversary.

VA awarded a \$9.1 million dollar contract to IBM, based in Bethesda, MD, to work with the VA and implement the system. This new VA online claim system is scheduled to be up and running by November 2010.

The paperless claims system does raise questions surrounding the security of confidential information, veterans without access to a computer and having the veteran file the claim themselves and deal directly with the VA. The best advice is for a veteran to meet with an accredited veteran service officer to assist him or her with the preparation, presentation and possible appeal of a claim for VA benefits.

For more information on this or other veteran issues, please contact an accredited veteran service officer in your area. Veterans in Arapahoe County can call their Veterans Service Office at 303-738-8045.

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