

VA Tightens Protections for Veterans Paperwork

Peake: Lapses 'Unacceptable'

Nov 15, 2008

WASHINGTON — Secretary of Veterans Affairs Dr. James B. Peake vowed swift action after a handful of documents related to veterans' applications for financial benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) were found among documents identified for shredding. The documents, which were not duplicated in government files, could have affected veterans' eligibility for benefits.

"I insist on the highest possible standards for processing and safeguarding information in VA's custody," Peake said. "It is unacceptable that documents important to a veteran's claim for benefits should be misplaced or destroyed."

Peake said VA's Office of the Inspector General (IG) is investigating the misplaced documents, and anyone who violated Department policy on protecting documents will be held accountable.

The documents were discovered by employees of VA's IG office during an audit at three of VA's 56 regional benefits offices, which process applications for disability pay, VA pensions, educational assistance, home loans and similar financial benefits.

IG auditors found a handful of documents waiting to be shredded, which might have affected the fate of veterans' applications. The documents were returned to the proper offices for processing.

Retired Rear Adm. Patrick W. Dunne, VA's Under Secretary for Benefits, immediately directed all of VA's regional offices to suspend all document shredding while IG and VA officials determine whether the problem is more widespread. Directors of the regional offices will have to certify in writing that no original copies of key documents or records from veterans' cases under consideration are being destroyed.

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VA has procedures for determining the disposition of paperwork. Original copies of discharge papers, marriage certificates and death certificates are returned to veterans or families when no longer needed. Duplicate copies of paperwork no longer needed are appropriately destroyed to protect the privacy of veterans and their families.