

VFW Statement on VAWatchdog.org Attack

Jul 13, 2009

WASHINGTON — The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. is very disappointed that the founder of VAWatchdog.org would twist a simple request for assistance into an attack against the invaluable service work done by the VFW and other Veterans' Service Organizations.

In a July 13 posting at <http://www.vawatchdog.org/09/nf09/nfjulo9/nfo71309-6.htm>, a reader writes: "I am recently a Service Officer with a VFW post and am trying to get training but have been very unsuccessful in that attempt. Do you know of any training courses that are inexpensive or free since the VFW does not have the funds to pay for this? Thank you for your help."

VAWatchdog founder Larry Scott champions himself as a veterans' rights advocate, but he did his readers a tremendous disservice by making no attempt to first ask the VFW, "Why not?"

Mr. Scott instead rehashes an old story that is about as relevant as comparing today's VA healthcare to that of 1932, and then turns the column over to Jim Strickland, who is blatantly pro-lawyer and against the free service work done by the VSO community.

To answer the question: VFW Post Service Officers are required to attend annual training sponsored by their respective VFW Department Service Officer, but the costs associated with attending the training is normally borne by the sponsoring VFW Post. An expanded response would have included:

- A Post Service Officer is a volunteer who is often a veteran's first contact in the claims process, although in a limited role, such as disseminating VA "how to" information and claim form completion, such as ensuring blocks A through Z are answered. Completed claims are mailed directly to VFW Department Service Officers who work in the nearest VA Regional Office. The Post Service Officer has no further role in the process; should further information be required, the Department Service Officer contacts the claimant directly.
- There are more than 900 VFW-accredited service officers serving veterans and their families throughout the U.S., the Philippines, Puerto Rico and Europe. These service officers

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fall largely into two groups: Individuals who work in VA Regional Offices, and county and state service officers who work in the field. In 2008, these service officers collectively helped almost 95,000 veterans to recoup more than \$1.2 billion in earned compensation and pension for free.

Only trained and certified VFW professionals work with veterans to ensure their claims are fully developed. They review VA rating decisions for accuracy and argue directly with VA adjudicators when their decisions are wrong. If an appeal is appropriate, they discuss issues with veterans, help develop required information, and represent them at hearings before Decision Review Officers. If VA decisions remain negative, the VFW has a highly skilled staff at the Board of Veterans Appeals in Washington to help ensure that veterans receive every benefit to which they are entitled under the law.

New service officers who work in VA Regional Offices are required to attend a basic benefits boot camp that includes more than 40 hours of grueling training on VA benefits, the claims process, forms completion, the VA rating schedule, accreditation, ethics, and more. The VFW also provides 80 hours of continuing classroom education annually to those service officers. The training syllabus is updated continuously to ensure service officers receive the most current information and skills to go toe-to-toe with VA rating officials. Ninety percent of this training is conducted by some of the best (recently retired) VA rating specialists and Decision Review Officers available.

Mr. Strickland's assertion that attorneys undergo years of training is true, but rarely does a lawyer receive even a single class on veterans' benefits. This results in lawyers having to learn about veterans' benefits programs as they go, much as an on-call substitute teacher would do the night before class.

There are some lawyers who have created practices to represent veterans, either pro bono or, after failed appeals, at the veterans court. The VFW has the highest respect for them, as we do for any skilled veterans' advocate. However, they are too few in number to represent even a small fraction of the nearly 1 million individuals who have claims pending at the VA right now.

Mr. Strickland's advice to learn more about VA benefits is fine, although his endorsement of National Veterans Legal Services Program products amounts to almost \$680. The cost for one copy of the 2009 VFW Guide for Post Service Officers is \$6.90 — a much better deal, and available at <http://www.vfwstore.org/detail.aspx?ID=22689>.

Veterans' Service Organizations provide thousands of professional advocates to serve veterans and their families, and unlike most attorneys who want to be compensated for their work, we provide our service for free. The work we do to help fellow Americans is something worth celebrating, not ridicule.

The VFW expected a higher standard from VAWatchdog.org.