

BROKEN VA CLAIMS SYSTEM TOPS VFW LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

600 War Veterans to Storm Capitol Hill Tuesday

Mar 05, 2010

WASHINGTON — A broken Department of Veterans Affairs disability claims system will be the top legislative issue next week when more than 600 war veterans storm Capitol Hill for the annual legislative conference of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S.

“VA healthcare is world-class, but the VA’s benefits administration is the key to everything the VA does — and that key is broken,” said Thomas J. Tradewell Sr., the national commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S., the nation’s largest and oldest major combat veterans’ organization.

The VA claims backlog for disability, compensation, education and appeals currently exceeds 1.1 million, which results in average waiting times ranging from 180 days for new claims to be adjudicated to two years for appeals. Worse still, according to Tradewell, is the adjudication error rate.

The VA cites a system-wide error rate of 17 percent, but the VA Inspector General reported error rates ranging from 25 to 38 percent in VA regional offices in Virginia, Alaska and Maryland for three of the most commonly filed claims — Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Traumatic Brain Injuries, and illnesses related to exposure to the herbicide Agent Orange.

“Asking a veteran to wait half of a year or more for a rating decision that could have a one-in-three chance or more of being incorrect is absolutely unacceptable,” said Tradewell, a combat-wounded Vietnam veteran from Sussex, Wis.

“Veterans have earned the right to better service from our nation, and VA has the undeniable responsibility to properly review and take corrective action on claims processed at regional offices with abysmal quality standards.”

Tradewell is scheduled to testify Tuesday at 9:30 a.m. before a joint hearing of the Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees in room G-50 of the Dirksen Senate Office

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Aside from the claims issue, other VFW high interest items include the proper care and treatment of servicemen and women veterans returning home with traumatic injuries to mind and body, the need for an integrated information technology system to bring the VA into the 21st century, veterans' unemployment, homelessness, and military caregivers and survivor benefits, among others.

Joining Tradewell at the three-day legislative conference will be VFW and Ladies Auxiliary leaders from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Europe, Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean. They will carry the VFW legislative agenda to their congressional members and staffs following the Tuesday testimony.

The conference kicks off Monday at the Hyatt Regency-Crystal City with the presentation of VFW national awards and special guest speakers who include VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki, Army Chief of Staff Gen. George W. Casey Jr., and Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano.

National awards to be presented are the VFW Congressional Award to Rep. Ike Skelton (D-Mo.), the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee; the VFW News Media Award to Army Times Publishing Company; a VFW Gold Medal and Citation to the Army's Old Guard; and VFW Teachers Awards to Patricia Mazure of Taylor Elementary School in Trenton, Mich., Mark D. Leet of Simons Middle School in Flemingsburg, Ky., and William V. Melega of Chapel Hill High School in Chapel Hill, N.C.

The Monday conference will stream live on www.vfw.org, and video of Tradewell's testimony will be available online Tuesday afternoon.