

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 28, 2013

The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420-0001

Dear Secretary Shinseki:

We are writing to express our continued frustration about the on-going and unresolved backlog of disability claims at the Veteran's Benefits Administration's Baltimore Regional Office. We request that you promptly provide us with an action plan to address this serious issue and assign a senior level official at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to communicate with us about the status and progress made under this plan.

A recent report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that nationally, the VA has been unable to keep up with demand, and from 2009 to 2011, its caseload grew by 29 percent. As you are well aware, the VA is experiencing a historic level of claims from Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, whose disabilities tend to be more complex than cases in the past. Further it is expected that claims will continue to increase as the country transitions from a decade at war.

The backlog in the Baltimore VA office is particularly bad, with an average wait time for an initial decision at almost 12 months. It has been reported that approximately 84 percent or 16,800 local claims pending in the Baltimore VA office are older than 125 days. The Baltimore office has the highest percentage of backlogged cases in the country as of Jan. 19, 2013. Furthermore, the error rate in Baltimore is also the highest in the country at 26.2 percent, compared to 13.7 percent nationally. Your agency has acknowledged that the problems at the Baltimore office are severe enough to warrant additional training and quality checks. This is inexcusable and deserves your focused and immediate attention.

Since 2011, we have pressed you to develop and execute a plan to address backlog and quality issues, yet our veteran's still experience inexcusable delays and errors in the adjudication of their claims. We cannot allow this to continue. Please provide us with the following information:

- Has the Department of Veterans Affairs developed a plan of actions and milestones with an oversight officer or coordinators to meet the 2015 goal of processing claims within 125 days? Who is heading this effort?
- What is the status of the development of a paperless claims system?

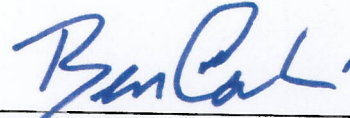
- What is the status of developing an information sharing relationship with the Social Security Administration, as recommended by the GAO? Has there been progress in improving this relationship? Who is heading this effort?
- What will the impact of sequestration be on the timelessness of claims processes?

Our brave veterans and their families have made every sacrifice in service to our nation. It is our duty to meet our obligations to provide these men and women the services and benefits they were promised and earned in an efficient manner. We hope to work with you to improve services for our veterans in the Baltimore office and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Barbara A. Mikulski
United States Senator



Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator