

DAVID LOEBSACK
2ND DISTRICT, IOWA

COMMITTEES:
ARMED SERVICES
SUBCOMMITTEES:
MILITARY PERSONNEL
READINESS

EDUCATION AND THE WORKFORCE
SUBCOMMITTEES:
HEALTH, EMPLOYMENT, LABOR,
AND PENSIONS
HIGHER EDUCATION AND
WORKFORCE TRAINING

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-1502

July 10, 2013

WASHINGTON OFFICE:
1527 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515
(202) 225-6576

DISTRICT OFFICES:
125 SOUTH DUBUQUE STREET
IOWA CITY, IA 52240
(319) 351-0789

150 1ST AVENUE NE
SUITE 375
CEDAR RAPIDS, IA 52401
(319) 364-2288
1 (866) 914-IOWA

The Honorable Eric Shinseki
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Shinseki:

Last week, I held seven roundtable discussions with veterans, their families, county veterans service officers, and Veterans Service Organizations throughout eastern and southeastern Iowa. Hearing Iowa veterans tell the story of their service and sacrifice for our nation is a truly humbling experience. Hearing them tell me about their frustrations regarding working with the VA – which in some cases have gone on for years – was deeply troubling.

After discussing many issues in detail during these roundtables, I want to share with you several issues that were raised repeatedly by Iowa veterans. I urge you to closely review these concerns and take these concerns and ideas into account as you continue to work to ensure our veterans receive nothing but top quality care and services.

Disability Claims

According to VA statistics, as of July 8th, 798,060 claims were pending in the VA system nationwide. Of these, 523,164, or 65.5% are backlogged. The most frequent topic raised with me at my roundtables was this backlog. It's quite simple – the backlog means that veterans are not receiving the care they deserve. A promise made should be a promise kept. The backlog is breaking the promise we made to our veterans.

While I recognize that recent steps have been taken in an attempt to improve the process, more must be done. The work is not finished until no veteran is left waiting for their rightful benefits and the highest possible accuracy is achieved in processing the claims. I have worked with many Iowa veterans to assist them in navigating the claims process, but far too many veterans in Iowa and across the country are experiencing significant hardship – made even worse by these tough economic times – while awaiting a decision from the VA.

Veterans at my roundtables had a number of suggestions for improving the process. For example, the new Fully Developed Claims program allows quicker processing of veterans' claims. However, veterans who attended my roundtables were concerned that previously submitted claims currently in the development process are not being moved into the Fully Developed Claims program despite meeting the program's criteria. The veterans' suggestion was to allow

those who have previously submitted claims to ask that their claim be moved into the Fully Developed Claims program if they meet the necessary criteria.

Those attending my roundtables also raised concerns about having to start a new claim for their dependents if a child is born after the claim is filed. They suggest allowing an amendment to be filed to the original claim instead of being forced to restart the entire process.

In addition, attendees at my roundtables believe that the VA should make a concerted effort to hire veterans to adjudicate claims and allow veterans and military family members to volunteer in regional processing centers to help where possible while protecting claimants' privacy.

I urge you take these suggestions into account. I also request that you provide me with details regarding all further steps that will be taken to end the claims backlog as quickly as possible, including steps to improve accuracy, streamline the processing, and achieve interoperability with the Department of Defense to ensure a seamless transition into the VA system.

Appeals Process

Veterans in attendance at my roundtable also raised specific concern about the length of time it takes to appeal a claims decision. The process is confusing and far too lengthy, leaving veterans in limbo while they await a decision. I remain concerned that training must be improved for claims processors and that accuracy in adjudicating a claim the first time must be emphasized. When a veteran does file an appeal, it should move in a streamlined process from the regional office to the Board of Veterans' Appeals, and veterans should be kept fully apprised of its status.

I request that you provide me with the VA's plan to improve and streamline the appeals process in order to provide veterans with a decision on their appeal as rapidly as possible.

Agent Orange

Many of the veterans who attended my roundtable served our country in the Vietnam War. During their service, they were exposed to Agent Orange, resulting in significant health consequences. I applaud the 2009 expansion of the list of presumptive diseases associated with Agent Orange exposure. I also believe that we must continue to carefully review that list to ensure it reflects the health effects being experienced by veterans exposed to Agent Orange. Several veterans at my roundtables specifically advocated for inclusion of brain cancer in the list of presumptive diseases.

I request that you consider the inclusion of brain cancer and provide me with an update on the VA's position on inclusion of this disease in the list of presumptive diseases.

Transportation to and Treatment in VA Medical Facilities

Veterans also raised concerns regarding adequate transportation options for those living in rural areas who must travel to VA medical facilities. Veterans Service Organizations and dedicated volunteers do incredible work providing transportation options. However, I believe the VA should constantly review the options available to veterans and consider expanding transportation support for veterans living in rural areas. I request that you provide me with an update on

transportation options for veterans in rural areas and any proposals under consideration to expand that access.

In addition, while the vast majority of the dedicated staff who work at VA medical facilities are committed to serving our veterans with the best care and support possible, many veterans who attended my roundtables raised concerns about unhelpful staff they have encountered while receiving care in VA facilities. It's important that all veterans are treated in a respectful environment while receiving care.

I strongly urge you take these ideas and concerns into account and work to address the issues raised by my constituents. I stand ready to continue to work with you to ensure that all veterans receive the care, benefits, and services they need and deserve.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dave Loeb sack". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent "D" and "L".

Dave Loeb sack
Iowa's Second District