



HUNTINGTON REGIONAL OFFICE ACTION REVIEW AFTER ACTION REPORT

Date: February 6, 2019

Background

The American Legion visited the Huntington VA Regional Office (VARO) December 11-12, 2018. This year's focus for the Regional Office Action Review (ROAR) is the impact of National Work Queue (NWQ) and the Veterans Benefits (VBA) work credit system on the adjudication of veterans' claims.

The purpose of this visit was to review the service-connected disability compensation claims processing function. Before the implementation of NWQ, the Huntington VARO is primarily responsible for service-connected disability compensation claims for veterans residing in West Virginia. However, under the NWQ, claims from other jurisdictions are assigned to ROs based on the capacity and workload. NWQ has drastically changed the way claims are processed; a change not fully embraced by employees across the ROs.

Employees

The American Legion conducted interviews with eight Veterans Service Center staff during the ROAR visit and met with senior VARO leadership regarding VARO operations. Topics included:

- NWQ
- Leadership access
- Work Credit System
- Recognition of high performance in both quality and quantity
- Employee training
- Suggestions to improve the quality of claims processing
- Case reviews of 50 randomly-selected cases rated by the Huntington RO
- Quality review

The employees were very frank in their responses and expressed their passionate convictions for helping veterans. They also expressed general satisfaction with their employment and recognize the importance the work and how it impacts our nation's veterans. The greatest concerns expressed by employees at all levels were time constraints and production standards under the Work Credit System, NWQ and the frequent rework generated due to errors passed on from other stations. Employees with a working knowledge of the previous production standards expressed their preference over the current model. Some expressed concern that we have lost focus of the veteran in an effort to process claims faster.

Director Shannon Kelley welcomed The American Legion representatives during the entrance and exit briefings. Sean McLean, Director's Management Analyst and Chief of Staff, was very welcoming, accommodating, and active throughout the entire visit. Director Kelley provided a tour of the facility, making introductions along the way and explaining the various functions of each division.

All Huntington RO staff were professional, candid, and forthcoming. They expressed sincere care for the work and the veterans they serve; though not shy to express their displeasure with the systems and requirements that affect their moral.

The type, method, and quality of training received mixed reviews but with a majority consensus that improvement is necessary. Employees express concern that the training is not always timely and/relevant. Every minute is treasured and irrelevant training, they feel, takes them away from performing the critical functions of their work. The method and quality of the training was described as inadequate and ineffective. This was more generally applied to TMS training. Some employees would like to have more input in the training design and structure.

Seven of the eight employees interviewed expressed confidence when asked if they are comfortable raising issues with their supervisors. Five of the eight employees did not feel their concerns are adequately addressed or felt it was beyond the supervisor's control. They like the opportunity to telecommute but expressed general disappointment in the diminished sense of community and the ability to be more socially engaged with co-workers. In an attempt to preserve a sense of community and improve communication, Director Kelley conducts weekly conference calls with employees.

Some employees expressed frustration with the examination scheduling program (EMS) and felt more should be done to address the issue. This matter has been addressed and reportedly resolved by VBA. Moreover, Huntington RO employees are frustrated by ongoing latency, functionality and reliability problems with VBMS and other VA applications. These IT concerns are nationwide issues that transcend the Huntington RO, which is clear indication of the priority VBA should place on this matter.

The employees expressed a general dislike for NWQ but acknowledged that a system of accountability does need to be in place. When asked what they thought that should be the answer was either to go back to the previous system or to keep a larger percentage of the regional cases at the local RO. Nearly all of the employees interviewed felt that the system in its current form



places more emphasis on quantity than it does quality. They also felt the claims process would be better if they were able to work a claim at the same office until a rating decision is rendered, or at the very least have the case returned for final development.

Quality Review

The American Legion received the requested 50 cases for review prior to visiting the Huntington VARO. The American Legion was not able to review 3 of the 50 cases provided and of the 47 cases reviewed, The American Legion found that 10 (21%) either had adjudication errors or VA failed to develop the claim properly. The Huntington VARO agreed with the findings in 3 of the 10 cases. However, the Huntington VARO and The American Legion respectfully disagreed with their analysis of the remaining cases, in whole or part. The final outcomes are as follows for the 50 cases reviewed:

- Cases with no errors: 37/47 (78.7%)
- Cases with Errors identified by The American Legion: 10/47 (21%)
- Cases where a decision was corrected as a result of The American Legion's review: 3/10 (30%)

The majority of the errors identified related to disability rating and inadequate Compensation and Pension (C&P) exams, which are common errors noted by The American Legion at VAROs across the nation. Raters often find themselves in the position of having to choose between meeting their production quota and deferring a decision to afford the veteran the opportunity for a new, adequate C&P examination. This affects their production rates as deferred actions do not receive work

credit. We believe that that VBA senior leadership should review the current production requirements to ensure it is fair and equitable and that it is a sustainable model that will not have long-term consequences to the VA and especially the veteran community. We believe the status quo unfairly penalizes raters for doing what is right for veterans and adds substantial undue stress on RO staff.

We discussed the value and advantages of the Quality Reviews and In Process Reviews (IPRs) during our exit briefing. We also discussed moral and employee recognition programs either in place or conceptualized within the realm of the Director's authority and support from senior VA leadership. We also discussed that dissemination and application of rulings from the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims (CAVC) and the Federal Circuit Court in a timely and consistent manner.

Conclusion

The American Legion appreciates that accommodations given for our visit and the openness of the staff and supervisors of the Huntington RO. On behalf of The American Legion, I thank you and your staff for your hospitality and support during our ROAR visit.

Respectfully Submitted by,

Greg Nembhard
Deputy Director, Claims Services
The American Legion