



VA REGIONAL OFFICE, NEWARK, N.J.

Date: July 23-24, 2019

Attendees: Claims Services Coordinator Melinda Staton

Purpose: To Conduct a R.O.A.R. Visit and Provide Feedback to VA Regional Office Executive and Senior Leadership

Discussion:

The American Legion visited the Newark, N.J., VA Regional Office (VARO) July 22-24, 2019. This year's focus for the Regional Office Action Review (ROAR) continues to be the impact of the National Work Queue (NWQ) and the Veterans Benefits Administration (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 Newark VARO was primarily responsible for service-connected disability compensation claims for veterans residing in New Jersey. However, under the NWQ, claims are assigned to ROs based on the capacity and workload.

LaShandra Carter (Acting Veterans Service Center Manager for the day) and Barbara Sapp (Chief of Support Services) were both very welcoming and professional to The American Legion staff member conducting the site visit. The visit began with a briefing by Carter who provided an overview of the service center operations in the Newark Regional Office, followed by a tour of the facility and employee interviews.

Employee Sentiment

The Newark RO employees expressed that helping and "serving those who served" are most rewarding aspects of their job and knowing they are having a positive impact on veterans is a personally fulfilling experience. Overall, RO employees felt valued and appreciated, as evidenced by interaction with the Service Center Manager and coaches, and the frequent feedback from local leadership. Employees expressed appreciation to RO leadership for their input when seeking innovative ideas to foster both individual and station improvement and advancement.

Employees were divided on the issue of whether they have enough time to meet their required standards. Half of those interviewed said they do have enough time, provided the system is working correctly, do not take lunch and breaks, and received excluded time for difficult cases. The other half of employees stated they do not have enough time "to properly and accurately process and work a claim." One employee said, "development is lacking due to the lack of time. The amount of time allotted to work an MST (Military Sexual Trauma) claim is not sufficient."

When asked about the Work Credit System, all employees acknowledged the need for accountability. Some employees did not feel the current system was fair, especially the standards for Rating Veterans Service Representatives (RVSRs). Employees agreed that quality should have greater emphasis over quantity (production). Those who are meeting production standards struggle with the issue choosing between points or doing what they feel is needed to properly work a veteran's claim.

Training and Quality

The RO employees felt they are receiving timely, accurate training and information. However, they felt that training from the VBA Central Office (VACO) is frequent but inadequate, and does not aid them in their work. Employees expressed frustration about frequent manual updates because they often do not have enough time to review the changes. The employees were also frustrated that TMS (Talent Management System) training is often outdated and that they are not able to receive feedback on suggestions to update it. Employees suggested VACO provide more time for training and tailor training to the actual training needs of the employee.

Employees feel the quality of work across the regional offices needs improvement. They point to inconsistent practices across the regional offices as the cause of too much rework. Errors during the case-development phase is also a major cause of frustrations from the employees. Employees expressed that these error trends create and add to a stressful work environment. The sentiment among RO employees is that the National Work Queue was intended to improve processing and adjudicating claims and create standardization across ROs, but that is not happening.

Leadership and employee relations

Employees expressed feeling very comfortable with discussing issues with their supervisors and felt that their concerns would be adequately addressed. Employees acknowledged that many issues are at the VACO level.

Case Review

The American Legion reviewed a total of 50 cases (2 case files contained no information). Out of 48 cases reviewed, 9 contained errors.



Conclusion

The American Legion appreciates the accommodations of the Newark 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,

Melinda Staton
Claims Services Coordinator
The American Legion