



ST. PETERSBURG REGIONAL OFFICE ACTION REVIEW AFTER ACTION REPORT

Date: June 11-12, 2019

Discussion

The American Legion visited the St. Petersburg VA Regional Office (VARO) and the new Decision Review Operations Center (D.R.O.C.) June 11-12, 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. Additionally, since the implementation of the Appeals Management Act (AMA) in February of this year, St. Petersburg is one of the Regional Office's that contains the new Decision Review Operations Center (D.R.O.C.). A separate report concerning the D.R.O.C. is included at the end of this report.

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

Our point of contact for this visit was the Assistant Veterans Service Center Manager (AVSCM) Charles Ellis. We encountered a highly professional and courteous leadership team as we toured the facility. The visit began with a briefing by Charles Ellis and other Regional Office managers regarding overall service center operations in the St. Petersburg Regional Office.

The following information was provided during the briefing:

As of May 31, 2019, the St. Petersburg RO received 1,232 new claims and 4,313 adjustment claims (rating increases, etc.)

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2018, the St. Petersburg RO adjudicated a total of 67,422 claims. **As of May 31, 2019 average time in queue Fiscal Year To Date (FYTD) (broken down by cycle) is Initial Development (IDEV) 2.2 days, Supplemental claims (SUPP) 2.5 days, Combination 2.3 days.**

The top three adjudication categories where the RO identified errors in FY18 were:

- **Exams:** Need and sufficiency – Rating Veteran Service Representative (RVSR)

- **Manual updates:** Acceptable Clinical evidence – Veteran Service Representative, Military Service Coordinator and Authorization Quality Review Specialist (VSR, MSC, AQRS)
- **Insufficient exams:** Identifying insufficient exams – Rating Veteran Service Representative and Rating Quality Review Specialist (RVSR, RQRS)

To correct these errors, the St. Petersburg RO:

Required employees to review the Talent Management System (TMS) training topics related to VA Exams (Need and Sufficiency), VSR Manual Updates, Enhanced Exam Management System and Exams: Who, When and How.

The St. Petersburg RO provided current workload information in response to our request. The average length of experience for the RVSRs is 82.8 months and VSRs is 69.7 months.

We were afforded the opportunity to interview 10 Veterans Service Center staff during the ROAR visit. Topics included:

- NWQ
- Leadership access
- Timeliness and accuracy of information
- Production standards and Work Credit System
- Employee training
- Emphasis on quality vs quantity
- Case reviews of 50 randomly-selected cases rated by the St. Petersburg RO
- Quality review of the 50 randomly-selected cases rated by the St. Petersburg RO
- Brief meeting with The American Legion Department Service Officer (DSO) for the state of Florida

Employee Interviews – Summary of Findings:

The visit to the St. Petersburg RO afforded us the opportunity to interview a total of ten RO employees. During the course of the interviews, several themes emerged which will now be discussed in detail.

Employee Sentiment

All of the employees interviewed expressed that the Veteran and their family members being granted all benefits to which they are entitled is the number one priority when they report for work. Employees were service minded, veteran focused



and personally fulfilled. “It’s most rewarding to be able to make a difference”, “I love that I get to advocate on behalf of veterans”

St. Petersburg RO senior employees expressed that it was rewarding to be able to “help other employees get their claims done efficiently and properly. Most of the people that work in the office are new. I like giving tools to employees and I also like training”. Additionally, St. Petersburg fosters an environment of continuous mentoring and service to employees through training. “I love the training environment and that I get to give back to our new employees. Glad I was able to go back to the happier side of VBA.”

Overall, RO employees felt valued based on the actions of supervisors displayed. There is a strong demonstration of servant leadership as well. “My supervisor understands work/life balance”, “We get recognized by employee of the month programs and monthly lunches/brunches”. Some employees who are senior and frequently called upon to assist more junior employees stated that they would like to see upper management recognize them and also would like to see “slackers” be held more accountable.

Employees expressed that frequent interaction through team huddles by management is quite effective and informational. One frustration expressed by employees is the lack of timeliness of communication concerning systemic issues resulting in work stoppages. In the words of one employee, “Tell us that the system is down when the outage actually occurs instead of two hours later. I think the front office should send an email when these types of issues occur”.

Other employees expressed that management should continue active listening as employees feel heard when this occurs. Additionally, employees expressed making excluded time more available, when appropriate, would be helpful.

Work Credit System

Employees stated that systemic issues and outdated and cumbersome programs such as the Personal Computer Generated Letter (PCGL) cause work stoppage. Systemic issues are sometimes not reported when the outage occurs, many times, leaving employees not knowing what to do. Additionally, cumbersome programs such as PCGL are difficult to use and take a great deal of time in order to create a letter.

Some employees answered that there is enough time to “make points” but not without a cost. The cost to “make points” usually means foregoing lunch and breaks, mental fatigue, suicide ideations and increased requests for time off. As one employee states, “I’m not comfortable taking breaks because I’m not sure about production”. “I think the standards are a

little much. A little more time would be good”.

*** “I don’t think the standards are fair. There is a lot of stress. I’m having to talk people off ledges. Most of my team is comprised of disabled veterans. Even the employees that are not veterans are beginning to have mental health issues. Sometimes I can take it to that next level but usually I don’t. We’re all trying to be politically correct.”

Employees also feel the work credit system is neither fair or balanced.

The issue of quantity vs quality was continuously evident throughout the interviews conducted. Additionally, some employees expressed being able to meet standards (with a cost) as mentioned earlier in this report. Others expressed struggling to meet standards due to the push for production

“The claims with 20 or more contentions usually get derailed by the Exam Management System (EMS). Credits are the same for claims regardless of contentions.”

“It should never be that we assign a number to a veteran and say you’re worth this point. We need to make the standards more veteran centric and focus more on quality. Every veteran deserves a correct decision”.

“The new system is based more on quantity and numbers rather than quality. We work as fast as we can just to get the cases done faster. It’s not balanced. I’ve also noticed issues with the Disability Benefits Questionnaire (DBQ) system in Veterans Health Administration (VHA). A lot of DBQ’s are mislabeled in VBMS, therefore, they don’t get looked at”.

“I’ve never been an advocate that doing cases faster is better. You usually sacrifice one for the other. The number of issues on the number of contentions on claims have increased. Vietnam era veterans usually have less issues than our newer veterans”.

Training

Overall, employees agreed that new and refresher training is conducted on a consistent basis and is sometimes helpful. Training issues identified by employees is the difficulty in participating in training knowing they have to meet production standards for the day. Some employees suggested that training should be specialized and position specific. There tends to be confusion when the training is specifically focused on one position (RVSR) yet VSR’s are present.

One employee suggests “get feedback from us to see what type of training we actually need instead of blanketing the entire office with one type of training”.

Employees expressed training provided regarding AMA (Ap-



peals Management Act) was inadequate. The training was conducted quickly, and employees were not provided enough time to adequately transition into the new way of processing appeals.

The coaches do take the time to meet with one another to discuss issues related to training and how to best handle the issues at the local level. Employees at the RO also help each other when manual guidance on AMA is not clear.

Employees would like more live and hands on training. There are some training topics that are recorded which do not afford employees to ask questions. Employees also expressed the use of different methods of training would be of benefit. Methods such as video, hands on, in person and actually working a case live, were suggested as helpful ways to train. When there are long work stoppages, conducting a group question and answer session would be helpful.

Quality of Work Across Regional Offices

“Now that we have the NWQ (National Work Queue), you still have local policies that get in the way sometimes of the national policy. People share things from regional office to regional office. Realistic improvement would involve people in Veterans Affairs Central Office (VACO) who have never worked a claim before to come and sit in some seats, sit next to the Rater or VSR and see how they are working a claim.”

“You have regional offices that look at things differently as it relates to quality review. Some of the thinking is different from time to time. If you’re doing reviews, you should just do reviews. I don’t see why they differentiate from local and national reviews.”

“Some of the trends I’ve seen are a lot of Raters are placing future examinations on specific disabilities such as mental disabilities and musculoskeletal issues without evidence. Also, requests for exams for veterans above the age of 55 is happening nationwide. This should not be happening. With regard to migraine headaches, there’s a pattern of asking veterans to show notations of when they were out of work in order to be granted 50%. Those are some of the things I’ve seen. Now that the Raters don’t request exams, most of the exams are requested without a medical opinion. This makes the case delayed and holds up the veterans claim. The new law regarding AMA is another hold up.”

Timeliness of Information

The main emergent theme from this question was that for the most part, timely and accurate information is received, except during times of outages which cause work stoppages. The issue of information about outages was addressed earlier

in this report.

Leadership and Employee Relations

Employees felt comfortable with raising issues with their supervisors. Employees expressed that sometimes issues are adequately addressed. They realize that many issues are above the level of their supervisors.

Employees felt that “slackers” need to be held accountable and the hard workers are “not really noticed” or getting adequately rewarded or recognized. This issue was briefed to the regional office leadership team during the outbrief.

Additional Comments

“National Work Queue doesn’t give employees a sense of ownership because we don’t get to see it again. Claims are getting pulled into the National Work Queue. Before we were able to have a history with the veteran and if it (claim) came back to you, you could correct it. There’s no pride to say “that’s my claim”. The claims are touched too many times.”

“One nice thing I’ve seen is that the manual is starting to get more specific so that there is less variation of interpretation. One nice thing I’ve found is that if you submit a request, VHA will send an email if the exam is cancelled. Not so for contractors. Triage is only supposed to be 48 hours maximum. Instead, it is sometimes two to three weeks.”

DSO

One employee stated, “My first recommendation would be to the VSO’s (Veterans Service Organizations). One of the issues I have is with our hearings. Some VSO’s will automatically file an appeal for the veteran without speaking to the veteran. That’s why our appeals numbers are so high. This has been going on for a number of years. Some VSO’s take advantage of the 48 hour rating decision review and some don’t. Claims clinics foster a better relationship between VBA and VSO’s and the veteran.

“I would like to see better VSO and VBA interaction. I know in some offices, they don’t allow the employees to talk with the VSO’s. I hardly ever see VSO’s up here on the third floor. I go down there frequently if I have something that needs to be taken care of.”

Quality Review

The American Legion received the requested 50 cases for review prior to visiting the St. Petersburg Regional Office. The American Legion was not able to review 3 of the 50 cases provided. Of the 47 cases reviewed, The American Legion found that 11 (24%) either had adjudication errors or VA



failed to develop the claim properly. The St. Petersburg Regional Office agreed with the findings in 5 of the 11 cases. The final outcomes are as follows for the 50 cases reviewed:

- Cases with no errors: 36/47 (77%)
- Cases with Errors identified by The American Legion: 11/47 (24%)
- Cases where a decision was corrected as a result of The American Legion's review: 5/11 (45%)

Conclusion

The American Legion appreciates the accommodations given for our visit and the openness of the staff and supervisors of the St. Petersburg Regional Office. On behalf of The American Legion, I thank you and your staff for your hospitality and support during our ROAR visit.

Respectfully Submitted by,

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