



VA Regional Office
AFGE LOCAL 520
PO BOX 1778
COLUMBIA, SC 29202
December 9, 2013

Chairmen, Ranking Members, Members of the US House and Senate Committees of Veterans Affairs

Dear Committee Members:

Local 520, the exclusive representative of the bargaining unit of VARO Columbia, SC, wants to address the continued problem created by the brokering of VBA's workload from one Veterans Affairs Regional Office (VARO) to another.

In our December 8, 2013, letter we highlighted the problem created at the Wilmington VARO because of brokering of the VBA workload. We like to amend that to include this example.

The article, *Shift of national work to Minnesota results in benefit delays for local veterans, Vets' claims taking up to 9 months, Sctimes.com, December 7, 2013*, provides evidence of another VARO suffering under this failed concept.

- “Military veterans in Minnesota are having to wait much longer for their benefits claims because of a federal shift of backlogged cases to a regional office in St. Paul.
- County veterans services directors say it's now taking as long as nine months to process claims for disability compensation and other benefits that previously took about 90 days.
- Minnesota had a better-than-average record of processing claims quickly.
 - As a result, the Veterans Benefits Administration gave the St. Paul office thousands of additional claims from other regional offices that were far behind.
 - That means Terry Ferdinandt, Stearns County veterans service officer, is just now receiving responses for claims he helped veterans file in February.
- Ferdinandt wrote that passing the work to another office isn't the answer. The backlogged claims should be returned to the regional offices where they came from and those directors held accountable.
- George Fiedler, Benton County's veterans services director, said he is seeing the same delays.
 - Fiedler recalled a training session in St. Paul he attended earlier this year, where leaders showed him stacks of files sent from other regional offices that they had to process. Fiedler said his comment was, “Those who are more productive get penalized.”

- In response to the complaints, Franken sent a letter about the claims delays to Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki in August questioning the decision to send the additional claims to the St. Paul office.
 - “Minnesota veterans should not be punished precisely because our (regional office) works more effectively than others elsewhere in the country,” Franken wrote. “To do that would subject Minnesota’s veterans to precisely the problem we are trying to resolve — veterans not getting their benefits as quickly as they should.”

One of the VA strategies is to eliminate the geographical boundaries when it comes to claims processing and they think paperless claims processing will allow this to happen.

However, as Wilmington and St. Paul VAROs show, this strategy is flawed by a lack of staffing and accountability.

This shifting of the VBA’s workload from one VARO to another poises these fundamental management questions.

- How does the VBA determine its VARO staffing requirements?
- How are individual VAROs assessed?
- Who will be held accountable for individual VARO’s performance?
- Why are VARO Directors needed?
- Can VBA manage its workload from Washington DC?
- Why does the VBA have Day 1 Brokering Centers?

However, the question that the Committees should be asking is why are VBA’s VAROs not performing?

There is a leadership/accountability problem at the VBA from the VA Central office to the local level.

The few VAROs with good leadership, training, and workload management get penalized. However, the VAROs with poor leadership, training, and workload management get a pass and its workload is sent to the few good ones. Therefore, there is no reason for the poor performing VAROs to improve.

The pillars of an organization are leadership/accountability, processes, people systems and work place culture.

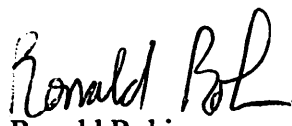
The St Paul VARO is yet another example why a 100% review of VAROs is needed to determine whether the organizational pillars are strong, weak, or crumping.

Identifying and solving the problems at each VARO and the Central Office should be the priorities of the Committees because until this happens the few good stations will continue to be

suffocated with the work of poor stations and the Central Office will not be held accountable for ensuring that VAROs perform at a high level.

Moreover, Veterans and their survivors will continue to suffer and front line employees will continue to be blamed while Senior Executives and middle management get a pass and a six figure salary and performance awards.

Therefore, we will continue to chime in weekly on this most critical subject with “objective evidence” because Veterans have earned the right to have a claims processing system that works for *all* of them and employees can only effectively serve them if they are provided with the *leadership, processes, people systems and work place culture* that are conducive to providing timely and accurate decisions.



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