

Effect of Government Shutdown on VA Benefits and Services to Veterans

Oct 08, 2013

STATEMENT OF

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FOR THE RECORD

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

WITH RESPECT TO

EFFECT OF GOVERNMENT SHUTDOWN ON VA BENEFITS AND SERVICES TO
VETERANS

WASHINGTON, D.C.

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE:

On behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and our Auxiliaries, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to present our views on the effects of the government shutdown on the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and the VFW's ability to provide service officer assistance to veterans and active duty servicemembers.

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Now in the second week of the government shutdown, veterans are raising concerns about receiving compensation, pension and Dependency and Indemnity Compensation at the end of October. We have asked our membership to call and write their members of Congress to tell them to pass a fully funded budget for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Included in this call-to-action is a request to pass H.R. 813 and S. 932 to ensure that VA will be fully funded through Advance Appropriations in the future.

In conversations with VA personnel and VFW service officers, the effectiveness of our service officers to represent veterans will be greatly impaired. VA has informed the VFW that all service officers, whose offices reside inside the Regional Offices (RO), will continue to have access to their offices to make phone calls and to review claims, but veterans will not be allowed into the buildings for face-to-face meetings. As the ROs begin closing, VFW service officers will have to reschedule meetings off-site to continue to assist veterans. Even if all service officers are granted access, there will be a loss of productivity in taking claims, counseling veterans and, responding to calls and reviewing decisions prior to promulgation.

Our service officers are working to reschedule appointments at locations that range from local Vet Centers to VFW Posts. Aside from the logistics of changing these meeting locations, service officers who do not have access to encrypted laptop computers will have to rely on filing paper claims as opposed to helping veterans file claims electronically. This is counterproductive to the desire of VA to move to an all-electronic claims process.

Currently, our service officers are in their offices to take calls from veterans, allowing for timely responses to questions and concerns. With our service officers rescheduling meetings outside the office, those calls will go to voicemail, leaving our service officers trying to reconnect with the veterans at a later time.

The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) operates on military installations around the country. It is a perfect opportunity for our service officers who are on or near a military installation to introduce themselves to service members and describe how we can assist them in filing a claim. TAP operations are halted by the shutdown at most locations where VFW pre-discharge counselors work. Currently, our service officers at military installations are working from their usual worksites after being denied access early on. Our service officer at Joint Base Lewis-McCord, Wa, will be relocated to the Veterans Home at American Lake VA Hospital if the shutdown continues beyond this week. At some of our pre-discharge locations, the intake sites are closed, so our service officers are either faxing claims to our

Department service officer or hand delivering claims to the RO for a date stamp. The VFW also predicts a fall off of service members and veterans who will reach out to us because weekly TAP classes are being disrupted.

It is our understanding that the Board of Veterans Appeals is operating day-to-day. Once this office closes, our service officers who assist at the Board will no longer have access to the building and their work - again, slowing the claims process and denying veterans of their disability and pension claims decisions and appeal denials.

These are the known setbacks of the government shutdown on the everyday work the VFW conducts on behalf of veterans, and the partial impact the shutdown will have on veterans and VA. It is time to stop leveraging veterans against larger political agendas. Partial funding measures or short-term Continuing Resolutions will only continue to adversely affect the care and benefits veterans have earned. So again, the VFW asks Congress to pass a full-year Fiscal Year 2014 appropriations bill without delay, and pass H.R. 813 and S. 932 to ensure veteran programs and services are not disrupted in the future.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for allowing the VFW to submit our views for the record. We will continue to inform your Committee of the impact this shutdown has on our daily operations and the veterans we serve.

Information Required by Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, VFW has not received any federal grants in Fiscal Year 2013, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.