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Tens of thousands of veterans are coming home to California after serving with honor in Afghanistan and Iraq. Many are carrying the physical and mental wounds of war.

The least our country can do is to give them the help they have earned. But in Northern California, it is taking ridiculously, unconscionably long for veterans to get their claims for disability benefits completed.

Worse still, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, even as it acknowledges the problem, isn't doing enough to fix it. That became all too clear at a congressional hearing Wednesday.

At the VA's Northern California claims office in Oakland, the average wait for veterans seeking benefits for service-related injuries and mental health problems (including post-traumatic stress disorder) is 313 days, well above the national norm. It has a backlog of more than 34,000 cases, 80 percent of which are at least 4 months old. That's the second-worst backlog of any of the nearly 60 VA regional claims offices across the country.

The backlog is so bad that new cases are being shipped to offices in Nebraska and Oklahoma for processing. Some veterans have had to get repeat medical exams because their initial tests are too old.

Wait, it gets worse.

Claims handled by the Oakland office often have "quality" issues, forcing them to be re-examined two or three times before a decision, Tom Murphy, the head of VA's compensation

services, told the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

Under questioning from Rep. Jerry McNerney, a Democrat from Pleasanton, Murphy said that workers made incorrect decisions in more than one in four cases.

Given all those problems, it's inexplicable why the Oakland office isn't one of the 12 regional claims offices across the country that the VA announced Monday will receive sweeping upgrades in the next several months to speed up claims under a \$300 million "transformation plan" that includes a new computer system and quality-control teams.

When McNerney demanded to know why Oakland is being left out, Murphy replied, "I cannot explain it."

That's unacceptable.

In a letter sent Thursday to VA Secretary Eric Shinseki, McNerney and 15 other California representatives, including Doris Matsui of Sacramento, urged him to reconsider and put the Oakland office on the list for the complete overhaul.

The VA does plan to retrain all workers at the Oakland office in June, but there's no guarantee that will be enough, and it does nothing to ease the backlog.

The Oakland office, which has a branch in Sacramento, is responsible for more than 837,000 veterans who live in 48 of California's 58 counties, stretching from the Oregon border to the Bay Area and through the Central Valley. Offices in Los Angeles and San Diego cover the rest of the state.

The members of Congress also demanded that Shinseki send immediate help to the Oakland office to "improve its processing of claims, erase this shameful backlog, and serve the veterans who so nobly served our country."

Our Northern California Veterans deserve nothing less