

The Bay Citizen

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Douglas Bragg, the director of the Department of Veterans Affairs' Oakland Regional Office, will appear next month before members of the California Congressional delegation to answer questions about the performance of his office, which handles all disability claims filed by veterans from Bakersfield to the Oregon border.

Bragg's decision to appear, which was communicated in an email to the office of Representative Jackie Speier, Democrat of San Mateo, comes at a time of greater scrutiny for the department, which has seen the backlog of disability claims increase to 866,000 nationally under the Obama administration.

The problem is particularly acute in Northern California, where returning soldiers must wait an average of 320 days for a decision, according to figures provided by the VA on Wednesday to Representative Jerry McNerney, Democrat of Pleasanton. Nearly 35,000 Northern California veterans are currently waiting for the department to issue a ruling on a disability claim. More than 80 percent have been waiting for at least 125 days.

"You can't pay for your truck, can't pay for your food," said David Smith, a former Marine who served two tours in Iraq and is now a student at the University of California, Berkeley. "If you have a family, it can make life impossible."

Five years after his discharge from the Marines, Smith, 26, said he had difficulty maintaining intimate relationships and regularly isolated himself on long, solitary road trips in the wilderness. Focusing on schoolwork was also difficult, he said, because images of carnage from Iraq regularly intruded on his thoughts.

On Tuesday, Smith learned that his disability claim for depression, back pain and injuries to

both knees had been approved after a 414-day wait. In the next month, the VA said, he should begin receiving \$1,478 a month in disability compensation.

“A pretty big weight has been lifted,” Smith said, “but I know a lot of the guys I served with are still waiting.”

At a hearing of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs on April 18, Thomas J. Murphy, the VA’s director of Compensation and Pension Service, said “quality issues” — including staff errors — were to blame for the long delays at the Oakland office.

In response to questions from McNerney, Murphy said that workers at the Oakland Regional Office had made errors on decisions on disability claims 26 percent of the time.

“There is something systemically wrong in the Oakland processing system,” said Speier, who, along with McNerney and 14 other House Democrats, sent a letter to Eric K. Shinseki, the secretary of veterans affairs, expressing concerns over “gross inefficiency” at the Oakland office.

The letter urged Shinseki to “send immediate help” to the Oakland office and asked that it be added to a list of 12 other Veterans Affairs outposts around the country that are due to update their antiquated, paper-based system by introducing an electronic benefits system by the end of the fiscal year.

The department responded Wednesday with an email to McNerney, saying that it would implement mandatory “challenge training” for the entire regional office in June. A spokesman for Speier said that he had spoken by phone with Bragg and Willie C. Clark Sr., the department’s Western regional director, who told him that there would be an additional “slowdown” while the staff was retrained but that “they intend to make up for that by making them more efficient.”

Bragg declined to comment.

Lawmakers from both parties said the department had not done enough to fix the claims backlog or improve the performance of the Oakland office.

In a response to questions from The Bay Citizen, Representative Jeff Miller, a Florida Republican and the chairman of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, said he shared the concerns of his Democratic colleagues.

“The VA needs to start holding people accountable,” Miller said. “Oakland has continued to be a worst-case example for the VA, and it’s high time they take direct action in bringing that office up to speed.”

Miller said he planned to “continue vigorous oversight” of the agency until the claims backlog was resolved.

Speier said she hoped that Bragg’s appearance before California lawmakers, scheduled for May 21, would help speed progress.

“Between now and then, he is going to have the opportunity to put in place some measures that will do more than has been done to date,” she said.

If not, Speier said, the California delegation will continue to “raise the profile of Oakland, and we’re going to make sure that in the end veterans in this region get the help they need.”

