

*April 19, 2012*

*Washington, D.C.* – In a House Committee on Veterans' Affairs hearing yesterday, Congressman Jerry McNerney (CA-11) demanded answers from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) regarding the backlog of veterans' benefits claims pending at the VA's Oakland regional office that serves all of Northern California. Rep. McNerney, joined by other members Congress from California, also sent a letter to VA Sec. Eric Shinseki asking him to reconsider his recent decision to deny additional backlog assistance for the Oakland VA regional office.

"I've heard from too many veterans in our region about the enormous and frustrating delays in processing their benefits claims. The VA has a responsibility to help our veterans in a timely and efficient manner. As it stands, the delays are unacceptable," said Rep. McNerney.

At the hearing, Rep. McNerney demanded to know why the performance at the Oakland office is so poor and what the VA plans to do about the problem. The answers provided by the VA did not provide any concrete path forward as to how the VA plans to solve these serious backlogs. Although the VA said that it plans to retrain all of the Oakland claims representatives in June, this action does not address the concerns of veterans who currently have benefits claims at the Oakland VA office.

Additionally, despite the fact that California is home to the most veterans in the Nation, and the Oakland regional office is one of the worst in the VA system at processing claims, the VA has excluded the Oakland VA regional office from plans to implement a transformational system that would help reduce the number of claims. The VA is moving forward with this plan in 12 other offices across the country.

"We have a responsibility to the men and women who have sacrificed so much to protect our country and way of life to provide benefits to them when they return home. The delays at the Oakland VA office must be addressed, and I call on the Obama administration to take steps to rectify the problem," said Rep. McNerney.

The full text of the letter sent by the members from California is below and attached:

April 19, 2012

The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki  
Secretary, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Ave.,  
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Shinseki:

We are writing to express our extreme disappointment over the recent decision by your department not to include the Veteran Affairs' Oakland Regional Office among the 12 offices slated to receive "claims transformation initiatives" which will address severe claims backlog issues. The Oakland regional office serves veterans from Bakersfield to the Oregon border, and averages a 313 day wait for a decision on a claim. As of last Monday, the Oakland office has an entitlement backlog of 34,159 cases with 80.8 percent of these cases sitting without a rating for more than 125 days. This is the second worst percentage of backlogged claims older than 125 days in the nation. The Oakland office, crippled by its backlog, is forced to ship all new cases to VA offices in Nebraska and Oklahoma.

We have heard from our veteran constituents that they are often required to obtain multiple medical exams because the first exam is considered invalid due to the lengthy passage of time between the initial claim and the time the claim is ready to be rated. This is gross inefficiency and an unnecessary hardship on veterans and their families, some who may even become homeless while they wait for a claim decision from the Oakland office.

Please reconsider your decision not to select the Oakland regional office as one of the 12 to receive transformation initiatives, and send immediate help to the Oakland office so it may improve its processing of claims, erase this shameful backlog, and serve the veterans who so nobly served our country.