

*April 26, 2012*

*Washington, D.C.* – Today, Congressman Jerry McNerney (CA-11) spoke on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives, calling on the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to address the severe backlog of claims at the Oakland regional office. Last week, Rep. McNerney wrote to the VA about the claims backlog and demanded answers from a VA representative during a hearing in the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

The VA responded with a list of actions that will be undertaken to address the issues at the Oakland regional office. The Oakland office services all of the veterans in Northern California and has experienced extreme backlogs.

“While I am glad that the VA has agreed to take steps to address both the inaccuracies and delays at the Oakland office, we need to see real results. We must remain vigilant in making sure that the VA makes good on its promise. I will continue to monitor its progress, and ask for regular updates to ensure that the problems are being fixed. Our veterans deserve no less,” said Rep. McNerney.

*The following is the text of the statement, as prepared for delivery, that Rep. McNerney made on the House floor today:*

I rise to discuss the issues affecting veterans throughout California, particularly the VA disability claims backlog and inaccuracy rates at the Oakland regional office.

A Vietnam veteran from my district, like many others across the country, is suffering from stage 4 lung cancer caused by exposure to Agent Orange. He made great sacrifices to defend our country but waited more than a year for the Oakland office to process and rate his claim. My office was able to help him, but such delays are unacceptable. Unfortunately, long waits for benefits have become the norm for veterans in Northern California.

With more and more veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, it is imperative that the VA take action now to address the backlog in Oakland. While I welcome news that the entire staff at the facility will be retrained, much more is needed. I call on the VA to implement a concrete plan to address the inaccuracies and delays at the Oakland office. Our nation's veterans deserve no less.

In response to the request Rep. McNerney made last week, the VA responded with a plan to take the following steps to address the backlog of claims:

- Implementing "Challenge" training for the entire regional office in June 2012 to improve employee skill levels and decision quality. Mr. Thomas Murphy, Director of the Compensation Service, will schedule experienced trainers to lead the office through this intensive Challenge training using nationally developed training curricula.
- The Western Area Director, Mr. Willie C. Clark, Sr., will work from the Oakland regional office for the next several months to oversee the execution of the improvement plan and mentor the new leadership team.
- In addition to technical training, the employees will receive team training, supervisory training, and communications training. Utilizing these types of curricula will sharpen focus and improve cooperation and cohesion to achieve mission requirements.
- The Oakland regional office shifted 27 employees to the Rating Veterans Service Representative position and four employees to the Decision Review Officer position to increase the capacity for processing claims and appeals.
- The new Simplified Notification Letter process (SNL) was recently implemented at the Oakland regional office. The SNL initiative allows decision makers to prepare decisions using simpler language and more concise text, resulting in increased productivity and easier-to-understand decision documents with a higher level of quality and consistency.
- The Oakland office also established a Quality Review Team to provide in-process quality reviews to eliminate errors at the earliest possible stage of the claims process.
- New claims and ready-for-decision claims are being sent to regional offices in Lincoln, Neb., and Muskogee, Okla., for processing.

"The VA has acknowledged the problems with inaccuracies and the backlog at the Oakland regional office. However, for the tens of thousands of veterans currently waiting for their claims to be processed, words are not enough. We need to see concrete results, and the VA must provide proof that its plan will reduce the backlog in a timely fashion. The men and women who have sacrificed to protect us all deserve answers. The VA needs to commit to reducing the backlog of claims and ensure that the same problems don't occur again," said Rep. McNerney.

