

[Stuart News](#)

*Monday, April 30, 2012*

When one of our nation's veterans faces a service-connected disability, the federal government has an obligation to review his or her case quickly and accurately to ensure our heroes promptly receive the benefits and services they deserve. As George Washington said, "The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive veterans of early wars were treated and appreciated by our nation."

Unfortunately, recent reports cast doubt on the Veterans Affairs Department's ability to process disability claims in a timely or accurate way, leaving many of our veterans to wonder if the country they served is committed to serving them in their time of need.

According to recent testimony before the House Veterans Affairs Committee, VA faces a backlog of 897,566 disability claims, with more than 65 percent pending for more than 125 days. For the claims that are processed, VA has a staggeringly high error rate of 16 percent.

VA Secretary Eric Shinseki has set an admirable goal of processing all claims in fewer than 125 days with a 98 percent accuracy rate by 2015, but for now, his department is moving in the wrong direction.

This is simply unacceptable. Veterans on the Treasure Coast and across the country deserve better.

Simply getting rid of the backlog and processing claims more quickly would be meaningless, however, if the quality of VA's rating decisions does not improve significantly. These decisions determine the financial benefits our veterans receive. When VA officials make a poor decision, one of our veterans may not get the assistance he or she needs and deserves. A wrong

decision in the other direction means that scarce resources are allocated improperly.

VA must implement meaningful reforms to expedite the claims process, eliminate the backlog, and improve its accuracy, to ensure that our veterans are better served. Improving training programs for employees who process claims is an important first step. I would like to see VA hire more veterans in these positions. Their experience could prove invaluable. The Department of Defense and VA also need to work together to standardize their disability rating systems and ensure that veterans have a smooth transition from DOD to VA.

The department must also take advantage of new technologies, so claims processors have the tools they need to do their jobs. VA is moving to a paperless benefit management system, which will speed claims and ensure accurate digital file-keeping for claims that are reopened or appealed. Making this transition is critical, but VA must make sure the new system is implemented correctly and efficiently.

Recently, VA announced it plans to streamline claims by separating those that it can process quickly from more complicated or difficult cases. This is welcome news for those whose claims will move more quickly. However, the department must ensure that the more difficult cases are handled by its most experienced, skilled employees, so that those cases do not drag out for months.

In Congress, we have an obligation to make sure that VA has the resources and tools to provide our veterans with the highest standard of services and benefits. I will continue working across the aisle to prevent cuts to veterans programs, including TRICARE benefits, and to encourage VA to implement necessary reforms. These are steps we must take on behalf of our nation's veterans.

In the meantime, if you are a veteran experiencing a backlog with a disability claim, or if you need any type of assistance with your VA benefits, call us at 772-288-4668, and we will do our best to get your case resolved as quickly and advantageously as possible.

*U.S. Rep. Tom Rooney, R-Tequesta, represents Florida's 16th District. An Army veteran, he sits on the House Armed Services Committee.*

