

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

May 17, 2012

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

Dear Secretary Shinseki:

We are writing in response to the Department of Veterans Affairs' Office of the Inspector General (IG) reports released on May 10, 2012, evaluating the performance of VA Regional Offices (VAROs) in California. These reports show that the Los Angeles, Oakland and San Diego VAROs have significant deficiencies as a result of mismanagement and a lack of staff understanding of applicable rules and regulations.

As a result, the benefits claims of veterans in California take longer to process and experience more errors than veterans' claims in other states. We know you share our commitment to ensuring our veterans receive the benefits they deserve in a timely manner and therefore request that the VA take immediate and concrete actions to address these serious problems.

The IG is currently conducting inspections of all 57 VAROs nationwide to evaluate how well each is processing disability compensation claims. Unfortunately, it is clear that high error rates are a serious problem within the California VAROs, and that these problems are most often due to ineffective oversight by management and incorrect interpretation of VA guidelines by staff.

For example, the IG determined that in processing temporary 100 percent disability evaluations, the Los Angeles office ranked 43rd in the accuracy of claims processing, out of the 44 VAROs inspected nationwide—with 97% of claims reviewed incorrectly processed. Similarly, 77% of temporary 100 percent disability evaluations reviewed were incorrectly processed in San Diego, and over half were incorrectly processed in Oakland.

The IG also reviewed evaluations of residual disabilities of traumatic brain injury. The IG found that in the cases reviewed about half of these evaluations were processed incorrectly in Los Angeles, Oakland and San Diego—a significantly higher error rate than in other VAROs around the country.

In addition, excessive claims processing times is a significant and reoccurring problem in the California VAROs. According to the IG reports, 80% of claims reviewed in Los Angeles were unnecessarily delayed. In San Diego, half of the claims were unnecessarily delayed. Shockingly, investigators found a claim in Oakland that had been pending for 8 years.

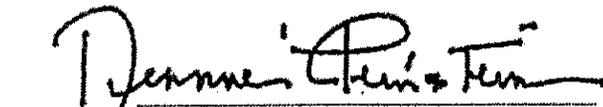
We are also disturbed by the IG's findings that California VAROs largely failed to consider whether Gulf War veterans who were denied service connections for mental disorders were still entitled to receive mental health treatment. This may have deprived these veterans of the opportunity to seek needed treatment from the VA.

Given the severity of the situation faced by California veterans waiting to receive their benefits, we ask that you provide us with the following:

- The steps being taken to immediately ensure that VAROs in California properly address the IG's recommendations, including how staff will be held accountable for their performance.
- The follow-up actions that will be taken to ensure California VAROs are improving in their performance.
- An understanding of why the Los Angeles VARO is currently in what is referred to as "safe mode," which means that staff are not held accountable to VA standards.

Thank you for your attention to this critical matter. We look forward to hearing from you.

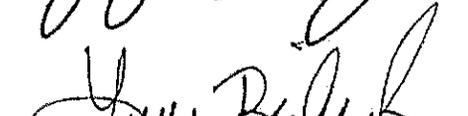
Sincerely,


United States Senator

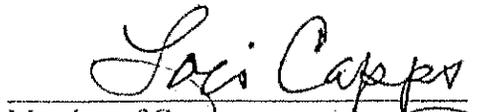

United States Senator

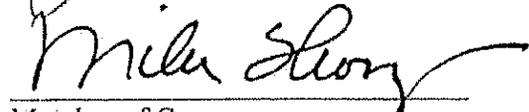

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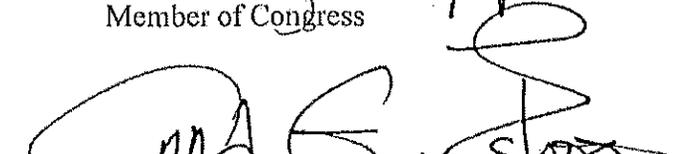

Member of Congress

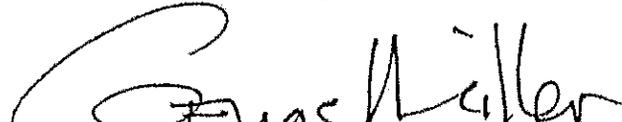

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