

Veterans Corner
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By: Robert G. Mitchell

VA Backlog could hit 1 million this year

The Veterans Affairs Department is nearing a milestone it would rather avoid: The number of backlogged benefits claims in its pipeline is almost 1 million.

While there is disagreement about how to calculate the claims backlog that has vexed VA officials for years, the symbolism of the 1 million mark is not lost on veterans, advocacy groups, claims processors, VA leaders and the White House who all seem to understand that a growing backlog means people are forced to wait for benefits they are owed.

In a sign that VA is swimming against a roaring current, Michael Walcoff, VA's deputy undersecretary for benefits, said the claims process is moving faster, with the average time to complete a disability claim now at 162 days, down from 179 days last fall.

The problem, Walcoff said, is that the number of new claims has grown by 13.5 percent in the last year.

By his count, the disability claims backlog today is about 402,000. About two-thirds are claims that were decided once but reopened because of new information or a revised benefits request. There are an additional 220,900 claims not directly tied to disability, he said.

But VA's own records show 722,000 pending claims and 172,000 pending appeals. That's a combined jump of 100,000 since January, raising the possibility that VA could have 1 million pending claims by year's end.

However it is counted, the sheer number is worrisome, especially because VA has hired 4,200 new claims processors since 2006 and is trying to speed processing by using more automation.

VA Open to Category 8 Veterans

For the first time in six years, veterans in VA's Priority Group 8 will be allowed to access VA's health care system. VA estimates that some 266,000 vets will be eligible.

Group 8 vets include those who have no service-connected wounds, are rated as 0% disabled or have incomes higher than VA's lowest accepted threshold.

That threshold also was raised this year to \$32,342 for an unmarried veteran and increases by \$2,222 for each dependent.

Vets who applied this year after January 1 but were rejected because of high incomes will not have to reapply. Those who applied before then must reapply.

It is the first time Category 8 vets have been eligible since former VA Secretary Anthony Principi suspended enrollment in 2003. VA officials said in April that regulations should be published by late June to begin the screening and enrollment process.

Extra pay for Guard and Reserve

National Guardsmen and reservists who are federal employees will receive extra pay when called to active duty, according to an April 3 Office of Personnel management announcements. The extra money will make up the difference between their civilian salaries and their active-duty pay.

The new policy was a provision in Public Law 111-8 approved in March. It provides extra funds for government operations through the current fiscal year.

As of April, the amount of the supplemental payments had not yet been determined. OPM and the Pentagon were still calculating how much certain allowances – such as housing and subsistence – account for basic military pay.

A 2003 Government Accountability Office report noted that 41% of all Guardsmen and reservists lose pay when called up. The Reserve Officers Association estimates that between 175,000 and 217,000 federal employees serve in the Guard or reserves.

Other than Honorable Discharges

To be considered a “veteran” eligible for Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Health Care benefits, a former service-member must have been discharged “under conditions other than dishonorable.” Under Va regulations, administrative discharges characterized by the armed services as “Honorable” or General Under Honorable Conditions” are qualifying, and punitive discharges (“Dishonorable” or “bad Conduct”) issued by general court-martial are disqualifying.

The in-between categories, administrative “Other than Honorable” discharges, and punitive “Bad Conduct Discharges” issued by special courts-martial, may or may not be disqualifying for purposes of general VA benefit eligibility or VA health benefits eligibility specifically. In assessing whether such discharges were issued “under conditions other than dishonorable.” VA must apply the standards set forth in Title 38 Code of Federal Regulations.

How do I enroll in VA health Care?

Veterans can get an application by visiting, calling or writing the nearest VA healthcare facility or benefits office. They can submit the completed application in person or by

mail. Veterans can also enroll electronically using the new online 10-10EZ. Veterans can apply for enrollment at any facility, at any time, during any year.

The initial enrollment will be confirmed in writing. After initial application, the enrollment system requires that most veterans provide the VA with a means test annually detailing their gross income. For more information, contact your nearest VA facility.

5 Years FREE VA Health Care

Veterans who served in a theater of combat operations or hostilities after November 11, 2008 have no copayment during the five-year period after separating from active duty for hospital care, medical services (to include medications), and nursing home care for any illness that cannot be clinically ruled out as being related to your combat service.

- Currently enrolled combat veterans will have their enhanced enrollment period extended to 5 years from their date of discharge
- Combat veterans who applied for enrollment after January 16, 2003 but were not accepted for enrollment based on the application being outside the previous post-discharge two year window will be automatically reviewed and notified of the enrollment decision.
- Combat veterans who never enrolled and were separated from active duty between November 11, 1998 and January 27, 2003 may apply for this enhanced enrollment opportunity through January 27, 2011.
- If you enroll with VA during these periods you will maintain enrollment status at the end of this period.

For more information please visit www.va.gov/environagents

Or contact Penny Brown at the VA Medical Center in Albany at 518-626-6710

Attention WWII Veterans

The Saratoga County Board of Supervisors and Saratoga county Veterans Service Agency are proud to have so many honored Veterans call out County home. Each year we make an effort to honor these veterans with special services and activities. This year, we will be honoring veterans who served during World War II at a special ceremony in October. This ceremony will honor each WWII veteran with a custom-made Saratoga County Medal and will include refreshments for the veterans and their families.

For those WWII veterans who have not received a Questionnaire and Ceremony Attendance interest survey please submit to this office your Name, Address, and Phone Number to the Saratoga County Veterans Agency at 152 West High St. Ballston Spa, NY 12020.