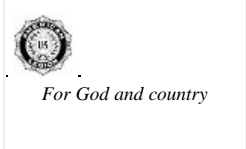


From: [Murrell, Debra N.](#)  
Subject: Shinseki renews vow to break backlog  
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# The American Legion

	<p>NATIONAL CONVENTION HEADQUARTERS PUBLIC RELATIONS OFFICE George R. Brown Convention Center, 1001 Avenida De Las American Houston, Texas Hall E, Level One (713) 853-8507 <b>(713) 853-8509 Fax</b> <a href="http://www.legion.org">www.legion.org</a></p>
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## Shinseki renews vow to break backlog

*VA secretary tells Legionnaires that all claims undecided a year or longer will be processed by the end of the year, targets 2015 for full elimination.*

HOUSTON (Aug. 28, 2013) -- Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki on Wednesday renewed two ambitious promises: eliminate the backlog of undecided veterans benefits claims and put an end to homelessness among those who have served in uniform.

Speaking in Houston at the 95<sup>th</sup> National Convention of The American Legion, the secretary said that by the end of 2013, all VA benefits claims pending a year or longer will be decided. "This number will continue to fall," he told thousands of veterans and their families. "Momentum is up. No veteran should have to wait to receive earned benefits."

He credits the use of a digital Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS) for helping VA bring down the number of claims languishing 125 days or longer from 611,000 to 472,000 since March. "We've been in paper for decades. Some would say we've been in paper for centuries. We are now transitioning out of paper and into digital processing."

Prior to his remarks at the convention, an American Legion-produced video was shown to demonstrate the ways in which the nation's largest veterans organization and its corps of nearly 2,700 service officers are working with VA's Fully Developed Claims program to help reduce the backlog. "We have cleared more than 20 percent of the backlog over the past five months," Veterans Benefits Administration Undersecretary Allison Hickey explains in the video. "It is continuing to steadily come down. The American Legion took the leadership role to build this community of practice. We have seen a doubling of the Fully Developed Claims. Last year, we were around 60,000 (FDCs). This year, we are 120,000. That's going to make a big difference in

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### ***Backlog 2-2-2-2-2***

terms of the speed with which – and the quality with which – we can do those claims."

"We have committed to eliminating the backlog – not reducing, not better managing – but eliminating the backlog," Shinseki told the crowd in Houston. "No claim over 125 days. Ninety-eight percent accuracy, the first time through, on our part. We said all along that it would take time for us to put together the plan and to resource it, to solve this correctly. We have done that. We are not going to leave this for another secretary or another president to wrestle with. The president wants this fixed. We are on track to eliminate the backlog by 2015."

Shinseki also ticked through other challenges high on VA's priority list, including clarification of veteran impact under the Affordable Care Act, ratification of an international disabilities treaty that affects some 5.5 million veterans who travel abroad and the continuing need to reach out to veterans in need of mental health care.

Shinseki explained that while many veterans suffering with post-traumatic stress work through it with help from their families, those whose conditions reach the "disorder" level need effective, professional treatment, which VA is providing. "At VA, we know that when we identify PTSD and treat it, people get better," Shinseki said. "So, whether it's PTS, PTSD, TBI – traumatic brain injury – or even depression, all are treatable, if we are able to connect with those veterans in need of help. Veterans dealing with these issues are not damaged goods. That's my line with every employer I speak with. They are fully capable of living productive lives. What they need are jobs, education (which we provide through our education-assistance programs) and quality health care, which we provide. What they don't need is being ostracized for seeking help. They deserve a real shot at joining the middle class, and they can help all of us rebuild our economy."

VA has been increasing staff to deal with growing needs in that area, adding more than 1,600 new mental health clinicians last year and hiring 500 peer-support specialists toward a goal of 800 by the end of 2013.

The secretary said VA's crisis hotline line – (800) 273-8255 – has received more than 890,000 calls since its launch in 2007 and has successfully stopped some 30,000 suicides in progress "because our mental-health professionals were on the line, ready and able to help."