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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

VA regional offices shut down

Because of the continuing government shutdown, VA closes all public services at its regional offices

WASHINGTON (Oct. 8, 2013) -- The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has announced it is placing more than 7,000 employees on furlough, effective Oct. 8, a move that will eliminate public access to all 56 of its Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) regional offices.

As a result of the furloughs, VBA can no longer conduct personal interviews and hearings, process GI Bill benefits, offer educational or vocational counseling, or provide outreach activities and programs -- including VetSuccess on Campus. The reduced work force also means that American Legion service officers are unable to use office space allocated to them at the regional offices.

Daniel M. Dellinger, national commander of The American Legion, expressed outrage at the latest impact of the government shutdown on veterans. "Because Congress and the White House refuse to speak to each other, our country's veterans are suffering more with each passing day of this extremely dangerous impasse.

"Now we've reached the point where VA can't even process benefits claims for our men and women who served in uniform. Our nation's leaders need a reality check. Do they really think they are serving the best interests of our veterans -- or the best interests of all Americans -- by forcing government agencies to shut down?"

On Oct. 4, Dellinger held a press conference at the World War II Memorial in Washington, a memorial that was initially closed to World War II veterans and is still closed to the public. He told reporters that the House of Representatives, the Senate and President Obama were all to blame for the shutdown.

Besides the 7,000 VBA workers furloughed, VA has also placed more than 2,700 OIT workers on furlough. This means that all development of VA software has ceased, including work on the Veterans Benefits Management System, which VA Secretary Eric Shinseki has repeatedly identified as a key component to eliminating the claims backlog.

In a statement, VA said claims processing will continue until funding is exhausted, "which is projected to happen in late October." Mandatory overtime for claims processors, scheduled to continue until Nov. 16, has also been abruptly halted.

VA employees who staff the department's compensation and pension call centers are still on the job. Veterans who want to file benefits claims or check on a claim's status can still do so by calling (800) 827-1000.

VBA also announced it will no longer be able to respond to congressional inquiries until appropriations have been restored.

Secretary Shinseki is scheduled to testify Oct. 9 at a House Committee on Veterans' Affairs hearing that will examine the impact of the current government shutdown on VA

operations.

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