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## VA: Legion big reason for decrease in backlog

HOUSTON -- The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is making progress in reducing its massive claims backlog, and – according to the woman in charge of overseeing benefits for VA – The American Legion has played a huge role in reducing that backlog.

Allison Hickey, VA's under secretary for benefits, told delegates to The American Legion's national convention in Houston on Aug. 24 that without the Legion's efforts, VA wouldn't be making the progress it has, including reducing the overall claims inventory and cutting into the claims backlog.

"None of that would have been done without you," Hickey said. "We're in a better place this year – though not where we want to be – than we were last year. And much of what we have been able to achieve is due in large part by the partnership that you have made with us and the work that you are doing with us every single day."

Hickey said that VA's claims inventory is down from 884,000 to 763,000, the claims backlog has been reduced from 611,000 to 478,000 in the past five months and that the Dependent Indemnity Claims backlog has been cut in half.

Quality performance is up for claims processing. The reason for that, Hickey said, is the Legion's large caseload of claims it files on behalf of veterans seeking VA benefits, as well as the organization championing the use of [fully developed claims](#) (FDCs) – the practice of servicemembers and survivors submitting all required records and documentation at the time they make their claim and certifying that they have no further evidence. Hickey said the average time for a Legion-filed FDC claim to be processed is 101.6 days – well under the average of 257.7 for non-FDCs.

"You have helped us complete more than a million claims ... not three years in a row, but four years in a row," Hickey said. "You have helped us do that in ways we've never done in our history before. You're the ones who bring us most of the claims, and that's why this partnership is hugely important to me.

"Your leadership in fully developed claims has been awesome, just awesome. We have tripled, since February, the number of FDCs we have in the books here at VA. That makes a huge difference."

VA began focusing on claims older than two years old in April 2013, and Hickey said that 99.7 percent of those claims were completed within the first 60 days of the program; 70 percent of those claims have been granted. Since June 20, 47 percent of the claims pending longer than one year have been processed.

Hickey said VA's electronic filing system continues to increase in use and asked Legion service officers to use VA's eBenefits portal Veterans Benefits Management System to file claims electronically and further speed up the process. "We're not stopping," Hickey said. "We're at mandatory overtime, and we're not (stopping that). Maybe by mid-November we'll come out of mandatory overtime, but this is not normal times, so we're not going to be in normal circumstances. We're going to press forward and we're going to make it happen ... with your help."

Robert Jesse, VA's principal deputy under secretary for health in the Veterans Health Administration, reinforced VA's commitment to end veterans homelessness, noting that in 2013, \$1.4 billion is being spent on specific homelessness programs, while \$4.4 billion is being spent on health care for homeless veterans. Jesse also noted that 1,600 new mental health professionals were hired by VA in 2013, while VA's suicide prevention hotline, the

Veterans Crisis Line, increased its capacity by 50 percent.

Steve L. Muro, VA's under secretary for memorial affairs in the National Cemetery Administration, told Legionnaires that the goal is for 100 percent of the nation's veterans have burial opportunities in a national cemetery within 75 miles of their home. To reach that goal, new cemeteries are planned for the San Francisco, Los Angeles, Indianapolis, Chicago, southern Colorado, western New York and New York City areas, and in Omaha, Neb.; Tallahassee, Fla.; and Scottsmeer, Fla. Cemeteries up to 10 acres in size also are planned for several rural areas as well. Muro also praised the Legion – specifically, the thousands of Legion honor guards across the country – for helping NCA receive extremely high marks in customer service surveys.

“If it wasn't for your support, we wouldn't be able to have that type of success,” he said. “Without you, many veterans would be buried without honors.”