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Subject: New Technology in Place for Electronic Submission of Veterans' Disability Claims
Date: Tuesday, June 18, 2013 3:30:57 PM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 18, 2013

New Technology in Place for Electronic Submission of Veterans' Disability Claims
Capability Marks Major Milestone in VA Transformation to Digital Claims Process

WASHINGTON – A new online application from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) enables disability compensation claims to be processed faster in a more end-to-end electronic environment, and VA is urging Veterans and their Veterans Service Organization (VSO) representatives to make full use of its capabilities to receive speedier decisions and reduce the backlog of claims.

The availability of the joint VA-Department of Defense Web portal eBenefits, which now integrates with the new internal Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS) electronic claims processing system, marks a major milestone in VA's transformation from paper claims records to a fully digital operating environment, one of the keys to VA's goal to eliminate the disability claims backlog by the end of 2015. VBMS has now been fielded at all 56 Regional Offices across the country, ahead of schedule. VA will continue to upgrade and improve VBMS based on user feedback, and add features and tools that make it faster and easier to process claims. Instead of filling out and mailing paper forms to VA, Veterans can now use eBenefits to enter claim information online using a step-by-step, interview-style application, with pre-populated data fields and drop-down menus similar to popular tax preparation software.

"There are so many advantages to making this move from paper to digital – for both Veterans and VA" said Under Secretary for Benefits Allison A. Hickey. "Veterans can now file their claims online through eBenefits like they might do their taxes online."

By filing electronically, any compensation benefits that are awarded will be effective back to the date the Veteran started entering their claim information in eBenefits. From that initial claim establishment date, each Veteran has up to a year to gather all necessary records and hit "submit" to preserve their original date of claim.

eBenefits allows Veterans to upload digital images of records and evidence to support their claims, bypassing the need to physically mail in personal records and wait for confirmation of receipt. VA is advising Veterans to gather and submit all relevant medical records and file a Fully Developed Claim (FDC) in eBenefits, which entails entering all available evidence at the time the claim is submitted and verifying to VA that they have no more evidence to submit. Veterans filing an FDC will receive priority processing over the traditional claims process. VA can typically process FDCs in half the time it takes for a traditionally filed claim, and there is no risk to Veterans in filing an FDC. If VA finds that there is a piece of relevant evidence that was not submitted by the Veteran, but is needed for a rating decision (like private medical records), claims processors will work to obtain that evidence on the Veteran's behalf and process the claim in the traditional way.

Once logged into eBenefits, Veterans can also choose to have an accredited VSO representative assist with their claim submission by filing an electronic power of attorney form. Using this new system, the chosen VSO representative, with proper authorization, will be able to see the contents of a Veteran's claim, track its status, and add additional information when needed. A Veteran and his or her representative can even work a claim simultaneously while both are logged into the system, enabling VSOs to assist more Veterans in their homes or even remotely.

VA will still accept claims in paper form, though processing may take longer than for an electronically-submitted claim. As of this summer, VA scans all new paper claims and uploads them into VBMS so they too can be processed electronically, though without many of the benefits provided when Veterans initiate the process in eBenefits such as guided questions that help ensure complete and accurate information and the immediate receipt of information without having to wait for the scanning and processing of paper documents. In addition to filing claims online, registered eBenefits users can track their claim status and access information on a variety of other benefits, like pension, education, health care, home loan eligibility, and vocational rehabilitation and employment programs.

A free Premium eBenefits account is required to file claims electronically. The quickest and most convenient method of establishing a free premium eBenefits account is to complete the remote verification process through the eBenefits home page, or use DoD's common access card (CAC) to register for and/or upgrade to a free premium account. Veterans can also establish an account by telephone at 1-800-827-1000, option 7, if they are in receipt of VA benefits via direct deposit, or by visiting a VA regional office or TRICARE Service Center (if they are a military retiree). For the location of the nearest VA regional office, visit www.va.gov and search the VA regional benefits office locator.

While compensation claims are pending, eligible Veterans are able to receive healthcare and other benefits from VA. Veterans who have served in recent conflicts are eligible for 5 years of free healthcare from VA. Currently, over 55% of returning Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans are using VA healthcare, a rate of utilization greater than previous generations of Veterans.

This is the latest effort in support of the Secretary's plan to eliminate the backlog. On May 15, VA announced that it is mandating overtime for claims processors in its 56 regional benefits offices through the end of fiscal year 2013 to help eliminate the backlog, with continued emphasis on high-priority claims for homeless Veterans, those claiming financial hardship, the terminally ill, former Prisoners of War, Medal of Honor recipients, and Veterans filing Fully Developed Claims.

In April, VA announced an initiative to expedite compensation claims decisions for Veterans who have waited one year or longer. On April 19, VA began prioritizing claims decisions for Veterans who have been waiting the longest by providing decisions based on evidence currently in hand that allow eligible Veterans to begin collecting compensation benefits quickly while waiting for their final eligibility decision.

For more information about VA benefits, go to <http://www.benefits.va.gov>. For more information on VA's Transformation, go to <http://benefits.va.gov/transformation>.

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