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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 4, 2009

The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Shinseki:

Recently, members of the Committee staff attended the annual meeting of the National Association of Veterans' Program Administrators (NAVPA) in St. Louis, Missouri. While in St. Louis, they also visited the Regional Processing Office (RPO) and had the opportunity to view a demonstration of VA employees processing claims for benefits under the new Post-9/11 GI Bill.

We first thank VA, particularly the staff of the St. Louis RPO and those who directly contributed to that demonstration, for their work in bringing about this valuable opportunity and for the courtesy extended to the Committee staff. We believe that the Committee's future work will benefit greatly from the perspectives and insights gained from this visit.

In that regard, we are writing to raise with you a number of suggestions and concerns that were identified during this visit.

First, we believe there were several suggestions made at the NAVPA meeting that are worthy of further consideration by VA, including:

1. Utilizing more staggered work hours at the Education Call Center, in lieu of the current 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. (central) schedule, in order to permit individuals and institutions west of the central time zone to have access later in the day.
2. Amending the letters sent to individuals who are awarded Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, to include a prominent notation suggesting that the student bring a copy of that letter to the educational institution when enrollment is initiated.
3. Establishing a centralized web-site to which educational institutions can refer for the most up-to-date instructions, policies, and announcements from VA with respect to the new education program.

We ask that each of these suggestions be explored by VA in order to help improve the communications and coordination involved in administering this new program.

Secretary Eric K. Shinseki

November 4, 2009

Page 2

Second, the Committee staff members were surprised to learn about the extraordinary amount of time that is consumed by VA claims processing employees as they navigate a cumbersome process to create letters notifying individuals about their award of benefits under the new GI Bill. We understand that there already have been discussions about improvements that could automatically generate these award letters, which should result in a significant savings in the time it takes to process individual claims. We hope that you will aggressively pursue these improvements and ask that you keep us advised of any developments in this area.

Finally, Committee staff learned that some delays in providing Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to veterans are due to an IT limitation that prohibits VA personnel from making more than one education payment on behalf of a veteran in a single day. We ask that VA aggressively explore whether any work-around or override of this "only once a day" glitch in the Benefits Delivery Network is possible in the near future. Such a change should result in a savings of days in the time it takes to process an award when there are multiple periods of enrollment reported for the same enrollment certification.

It is our hope that these and other improvements will help reduce delays in providing education benefits to individuals across the country. We appreciate your attention to these matters and look forward to continuing to work closely with you to ensure that, as we move forward, education benefits will be provided to veterans and their families in a timely, effective manner.

Sincerely,



Daniel K. Akaka
Chairman



Richard Burr
Ranking Member