

# **Examination of the VA Benefits Delivery at Discharge And Quick Start Programs**

Feb 24, 2010

STATEMENT OF  
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VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES  
BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
WITH RESPECT TO THE  
Examination of the VA Benefits Delivery at Discharge and Quick Start Programs

WASHINGTON, D.C.

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE:

On behalf of the 2.1 million men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S.

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(VFW) and our Auxiliaries, we appreciate the opportunity to present our views and concerns regarding the VA Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) and Quick Start Programs.

In 1973, I spent the last two weeks of active duty in the Navy at Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay. During that entire period I did not hear a single word about VA disability compensation, VA health care or the GI Bill. My experience was, I believe, not at all out of the ordinary. Other than education benefits, I knew virtually nothing about the services VA provided to veterans until I was hired by VA in 1974 as a benefits counselor to work on college campuses in the Detroit area.

The world has changed tremendously in the decades since my discharge from the Navy. DoD and VA have made significant strides to ensure that our newest veterans are better prepared for life after discharge than any generation of veterans that preceded them. Unfortunately, VA fails to reach tens of thousands of those leaving active duty and most Reserve and National Guard members. Further, the quality of the ratings given these warriors is, in a word, awful.

## Background

The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and the Disability Transition Assistance Program (DTAP) was created in the 1980's to better inform service members about benefits and opportunities following service. Those programs have expanded significantly so that today, classes and briefings start months before release from active duty. The TAP and DTAP don't just cover VA benefits. Information on resume writing, employment counseling, small business

information, personal finance, and much more is provided to soon to be released service men and women.

From 2005-2007, VA briefed over 1 million service men and women and interviewed over 318,000.

The BDD initiative is an outgrowth of the TAP and DTAP programs. It began in 1995 as a joint project by VA and DoD at only three Army bases. It has expanded to over 150 installations covering all branches of service. This program allows service members within 60 to 180 days of discharge to file a claim for compensation benefits, receive necessary medical examinations, and obtain a rating soon after release from active duty.

## Veterans of Foreign Wars

Veteran service organizations have worked hand in hand with the VA and DoD to ensure that our nation's newest veterans receive every benefit to which they are entitled under the law.

The VFW began placing national service officers on select military installations in 2001. Today, we have 9 Pre-Discharge Claims Representatives serving troops at 16 military installations. We also have national service officers in San Juan and Las Vegas who perform TAP briefings several times a month at nearby military bases and help service members who qualify for the BDD and Quick Start programs. Last year our service officers briefed over 14,400 service members and helped over 8,400 soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines file disability claims with VA.

The VFW also has two full time specialists reviewing BDD ratings at the VA regional offices in Winston-Salem and Salt Lake City Rating Activity Sites RAS. All told in 2009, our small cadre of national service officers helped BDD and Quick Start participants receive over \$9 million in benefits at or shortly after discharge.

### Challenges

VA reports that it received 51,000 claims from the BDD and Quick Start claims programs in 2008, up from 47,000 the year before. Further, it reports that nearly 60 percent of those it briefed filed claims.

These numbers are fascinating for several reasons. First, that at least 60 percent believe they were disabled to some degree during their military service is significant. While I do not have the exact numbers, our experience is that nearly all will receive service connection for at least one disability and most will receive compensation at some level.

Second, if 51,000 claimants represent 60 percent of those briefed, then VA is briefing only about 85,000 service members. However, it is our understanding that each year over 100,000 personnel leave active duty and another 100,000 are released from the Reserves and National Guard. While some Reserve and National Guard personnel use the BDD and Quick Start

programs as they depart active duty it is clear that a large portion of those serving on active duty and in the reserves are not receiving critical information through VA's outreach efforts.

The most interesting observation is that VA is a victim of its own success. It may be merely a coincidence but in the mid-1990 at about the time VA expanded its TAP and DTAP programs, VA's workload began to increase. While 51,000 claims submitted under the BDD and Quick Start programs may constitute only 5 percent of VA's annual claim receipts, VA devotes a significant portion of its workforce to educating service members and encouraging them to file claims. Further, many highly skilled personnel at the Winston-Salem, Salt Lake City and San Diego Regional Offices have been tasked to work BDD and Quick Start claims exclusively.

We do not suggest that VA or DoD lessen their efforts in helping service members prepare

for life after the military. It is absolutely the right thing; it may not always be the easiest or cheapest thing. We applaud Congress for encouraging these programs and we support VA and DoD in their efforts to ensure that every service member has an opportunity to adequately prepare for their post-discharge life.

#### As We See It

VA has several challenges to resolve if it hopes to improve the number of service members it reaches and the quality of the service it provides them:

There are too many service members who are not adequately briefed about their benefits prior to discharge. While DoD may require pre-discharge education far too many service members are either not provided, or find some way to avoid these programs. Further, VA has been slow to expand the BDD program to additional installations. In 2004, VA was at 139 military bases; in 2008 the number stood at only 150. *VA must move more quickly to expand to other military installations.*

Veteran Service Organizations are a critical partner in the BDD program. VA personnel have neither the time nor, often, the expertise to help service members fill out more than a claim. VFW service officers usually spend an hour with each service member, talking with them about their problems and concerns; they go through the service treatment records page by page, identifying chronic problems which originate or are aggravated by military service and ensure that those conditions are both listed and documented on the application. They accomplish Veterans Claims Assistance Act (VCAA) notification which helps shorten the development process. Finally, they provide answers about what to expect in dealing with VA.

As helpful as veteran service officers are you would think that DoD would welcome us with open arms. Gaining the permission of DoD to work on base requires careful and extended negotiations with both DoD and VA. That's because VA does not anticipate that service organizations may be able to provide service officers to help. As a consequence, space always at a premium, is often difficult to find.

As VA and DoD expand the BDD program to other installations, *we urge them reach out to Veteran Service Organizations to determine whether we are able to provide service officers to help them help service members.*

Finally, in our experience quality of disability ratings is no better in BDD and Quick Start cases than it is for other veterans. The VA STAR report for November, 2009, shows that 17 percent of all ratings nationally contained at least one substantive error. Winston-Salem met the national error rate, while San Diego, where Quick Start claims are rated had a 19 percent error rate. Salt Lake City trailed with a 22 percent error rate. Essentially, one out of every 5 decisions made by VA are wrong.

There are 29 members on the House Veterans Affairs Committee. If you all submitted claims for benefits from the VA nearly 6 of you would have ratings which were wrong.

We encourage Secretary Shinseki and his management team to focus this year on changing the culture in VBA so that quality is the rule, not the exception.

Aristotle once said: "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then is not an act, but a habit."

VA needs to create a culture where excellence is a habit.