

Service Office Report

Good Morning. The Service Office is operating at full speed with all personnel on board. Our operations of taking on new claims for Veterans and Surviving Spouses continues to grow which is shown by what the Service Office has provided membership for potential Veterans to join our organization because of our support and representation. Additionally, previous claims from Veterans that have filed before through the Veteran Affairs system are coming through for increases or new issues. The report from Veteran Affairs from the regional office in Des Moines that is provided with this report reflects what the Service Office has accomplished since October of 2018. The report also reflects what the other Service Organizations located at the regional office are also doing. These statistics do not reflect the daily phone calls, walk-ins, and hearings that are done on top of the daily correspondence received from our Veterans and Counties. Every day of the week from start to finish is non-stop, full speed, giving all attention from Service Office staff to support and represent everyone possible.

The new year has brought some significant changes to the Veteran Affairs which has also impacted the Service Office to adjust with the changes and gain the knowledge necessary to better provide the assistance needed. So, what are the biggest changes to date. The new VA Appeals Modernization Act of February 19th, 2019 which replaced RAMP that was signed on the American Legion National Convention floor in Reno. This action was designed to change the time limits to reduce the backlog of appeals in Washington DC and Regional Offices for Veteran's claims that were denied. A power point is provided to give you a brief outlook about this new law. It provides a bigger challenge for the Service Office in assisting what option will be best for the Veteran who was denied benefits by electing the option that can potentially overturn the denied benefit. All claims that were denied prior to February 19th, 2019, will stay in the legacy process that Veteran Affairs had in place prior to the law change. This new change will impact all Service Organizations and counties who support their veterans. The immediate challenge for those involved is what is now needed to grant benefits. This could include new medical evidence, statements of events causing the claimed trauma, and treatment of the chronic claimed conditions for which the veteran or surviving spouse is seeking benefits. Also, with this new appeal action, it puts additional burden on the Service Office when the Veteran requests that the Service Office be their representative for face-to-face hearings with the denying organization and having less than a week notification from the office of jurisdiction.

The second new change for the Service Office will be the on-set of the "Blue Water NAVY." The Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit ruled 9-2 in January of this year that Blue Water Navy veterans from Viet Nam would be eligible for benefits related to Agent Orange. The Secretary of Veteran Affairs, Robert Wilkie, had opposed this action requesting additional studies and more information. On 26 March 2019 the Secretary, in front of the Senate Veterans Committee,

withdrew his opposition and paved the way to move forward on the action for the “Blue Water Navy” veterans. What does this mean? Naval veterans who served between 1965 and 1975 and were within the 12-mile limit of Republic of North or South Viet Nam, and have a diagnosed presumptive condition related to Agent Orange recognized by Veterans Affairs would be eligible to file a claim for benefits. All the details have not been released of how Veteran Affairs is going to proceed in implementing this review and what will be the date of claim. The hope and intention are that those who have filed previously, regardless of timeframe, might have the same effective date as those who originally had boots on ground. The Veteran Affairs at this time are accepting applications for service connection for the “Blue Water Navy” exposures and whether it is a new claim or previously filed taking the new approach with the new Appeal Modernization Act for supplemental evidence of the change of law pending the official change of federal regulation supporting this action.

So, this is the posture of the Service Office which is non-stop every day of the week and with the best dedicated individuals that are impacting lives daily.