

**QUESTIONS FOR THE RECORD FOR THE HEARING
“THE FISCAL YEAR 2019 BUDGET SUBMISSION OF THE DEPARTMENT OF
VETERANS AFFAIRS”**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS’ AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

MARCH 15, 2018

Representative Beto O’Rourke:

QUESTION 1: Currently, VA sends surviving spouses a form each year that they must use to certify they have not remarried. This is a yearly reminder of the loss of their spouse. Please provide a detailed explanation of whether it would be possible to eliminate this yearly certification requirement and instead either have surviving spouses notify VA when they remarry or use another less intrusive process.

VA Response: VA is unable to stop the notice to a surviving spouse under the age of 57, to certify that he/she has not remarried. Under 38 U.S.C. § 101(3), a surviving spouse's marital status is a requirement in determining eligibility to receive VA benefits until they attain the age of 57. VA is required by law to continue to verify the marital status, even though the surviving spouse may not have remarried. Under 38 CFR 3.652, individuals to whom VA benefits are being paid are required to certify that any or all of the eligibility factors which established entitlement to the benefit continue to exist. Remarriage after the age of 57 is not a restriction to eligibility, so VA does not send the notification regarding remarriage after the survivor reaches the age of 57.

QUESTION 2: Please state whether there are additional resources or authorities that Congress can provide so that the Officer of Survivor Assistance is able to better serve surviving spouses.

VA Response: The President’s Budget requests three full time equivalent (FTE) and \$600K for pay and travel/supplies and training for the Office of Survivor Assistance. No additional resources are requested at this time.

Representative Mark Takano:

QUESTION 3: VA stated that it has notified approximately 8,000 veterans about GI Bill restoration and restored benefits to approximately 300 people. Please provide the following information:

- a. The number of unique applications for restoration of benefits that VA has received to date.**

VA Response: VA has received 1,321 unique applications for restoration of benefits to date.

- b. The number of unique applications for restoration of benefits that VA has denied to date.**

VA Response: VA has denied 491 unique applications for restoration of benefits.

- c. The number of unique applications for restoration of benefits that VA has approved to date.**

VA Response: VA has approved 776 unique applications for restoration of benefits.

- d. The total dollar figure of the restored benefits to date.**

VA Response: VA has restored over 8,000 months in entitlement to nearly 800 beneficiaries under the restoration of entitlement authority provided in the Forever GI Bill. As beneficiaries have a wide range of educational programs to choose from with varying costs, VA is unable to provide a dollar figure. The section of the law that requires VA to pay additional housing allowance does not go into effect until August 1, 2018.

- e. The average amount of time from VA's receipt of an application for restoration of benefits to when a beneficiary's benefits are restored.**

VA Response: The average amount of time is approximately 16 days.

QUESTION 4: Members of this Committee have received reports that some VR&E offices have counselor to client ratios exceeding one counselor to 200 veterans.

- a. Please provide the number of VR&E offices around the country that are meeting the program-specified 1:125 counselor to veteran ratio.**

VA Response: The following 31 Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) field offices are below a 1:125 counselor-to-Veteran ratio, cumulatively as of the end of February 2018.

Station	Location	Ratio
307	Buffalo	89
315	Huntington	108
314	Roanoke	101
402	Togus	94
460	Wilmington	78
316	Atlanta	106
319	Columbia	124
327	Louisville	89
322	Montgomery	119
320	Nashville	109
355	San Juan	94
325	Cleveland	113
329	Detroit	118
326	Indianapolis	113
334	Lincoln	99
330	Milwaukee	119
331	St. Louis	110
452	Wichita	89
436	Fort Harrison	114
323	Jackson	54
350	Little Rock	96
351	Muskogee	108
321	New Orleans	109
341	Salt Lake City	81
340	Albuquerque	91
349	Waco	125
463	Anchorage	87
347	Boise	100
358	Manila	36
345	Phoenix	119
348	Portland	112

b. Please provide a list of VR&E offices that are exceeding the 1:125 counselor ratio.

VA Response: The following 26 VR&E field offices are currently above a 1:125 counselor to Veteran ratio, cumulatively as of the end of February 2018.

Station	Location	Ratio
313	Baltimore	176
301	Boston	248
308	Hartford	128
373	Manchester	181
309	Newark	146
306	New York	151
310	Philadelphia	194
311	Pittsburgh	131
304	Providence	166
372	Washington	154
405	White River Junction	155
318	Winston-Salem	185
317	St. Petersburg	146
328	Chicago	129
333	Des Moines	128
437	Fargo	129
335	St. Paul	131
438	Sioux Falls	133
339	Denver	141
362	Houston	152
459	Honolulu	155
344	Los Angeles	227
343	Oakland	161
354	Reno	173
377	San Diego	177
346	Seattle	126

c. Please provide a detailed explanation and timeline of VA’s plans to relieve overloaded offices so that those offices can be brought in line with the program-specified counselor to veteran ratio of 1:125.

VA Response: VA continues to work on the allocation of resources to the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) Regional Offices (ROs) to meet the ongoing needs of Veterans through the annual Resource Allocation Model (RAM) process. ROs are prioritized based upon the greatest workload need, tempered with the Offices’ use of the National Service Contracts to assist in servicing Veterans and

participants within the VR&E program. In fiscal year (FY) 2019, VBA will continue to evaluate caseload and contract utilization and reallocate resources to ROs as necessary.

For FY 2017, under Section 254 of Public Law 114-223, "Continuing Appropriations and Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2017, and Zika Response and Preparedness Act" and for FY 2018, under Section 248 of the "Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2018", the law states: "The Secretary of Veterans Affairs may use amounts appropriated or otherwise made available in this title to ensure that the ratio of Veterans to full-time employment equivalents within any program of rehabilitation conducted under Chapter 31 of title 38, United States Code, does not exceed 125 Veterans to one full-time employment equivalent."

Under the Omnibus Appropriations Bill, "Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2018", the agreement provides \$66,000,000 above the request and intends that the increase be used for the Veterans Claims Intake Program; additional claims and appellate staff; increased staff for the VR&E program; and overtime payments, as necessary. The amount to be distributed to VR&E is yet to be determined, but may be utilized to fund additional FTEs toward reducing the counselor to Veteran ratio at stations where the ratio exceeds the stated ratio of 1:125.

Representative Elizabeth Esty:

QUESTION 5: The VA has outlined that they are creating an outbound call center as part of RAMP. Contract bids are set to close in March. Please explain if and how this is an effective use of funds and FTE to have the outbound call center with less than a year of use before the new system goes into effect.

VA Response: Consistently, Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), Congressional staff, and other stakeholders have expressed concern that Veterans need more information on RAMP and appeals modernization. In response to this feedback, VA has increased and improved its outreach through several different avenues. Primarily, VA has worked to increase awareness of appeals modernization and RAMP, through a combination of direct outreach and increased communications products. This has been in the form of physical mail, email, social media, increased web-presence, and in-person presentations on RAMP and appeals modernization to national, regional, and state level VSOs and Congressional staff. Following this aggressive informational outreach campaign, VBA has seen a corresponding increase in RAMP awareness as well as an increased RAMP opt-in rates. Accordingly, VA has determined that an informational RAMP call center is no longer necessary.

QUESTION 6: We thank you for hearing VSO concern that failure to test the Board lane during RAMP did not fully address the needs of the pilot. Please detail how many Board employees will be allocated to the Board pilot.

VA Response: The Board will begin to participate in RAMP with a gradual roll-out starting in October 2018. The Board does not anticipate allocating any FTEs exclusively to this test program. Instead, all FTEs involved in the program will incorporate decisions on RAMP appeals into their current workflow. All attorneys and Veterans Law Judges at the Board will be well-equipped to adjudicate appeals in both systems, as the Board has already begun training regarding RAMP and full implementation. Therefore, it will not be necessary to allocate specifically dedicated personnel to the Board's RAMP participation.

In addition to implementing RAMP, the Board rolled out a small-scale test program, the Board's Early Applicability of Appeals Modernization (BEAAM) on May 1, 2018. The Board and US Digital Service partnered with Veterans' representatives to identify a small number of Veterans who are dissatisfied with a recent claim decision. Participants will opt in by requesting review with VBA or the Board under the Appeals Modernization Act. This program will allow the Board to collect preliminary data about Veteran choices and experiences, which will allow VA to construct models and tests that account for observed preferences and uncertainty.

a. Additionally, please outline how the hearing requests will be worked under Legacy and the new appeal system.

VA Response: Hearing requests will continue to be worked in the order they are received in both systems, in accordance with available regional office and Board resources. Legacy cases will have priority. Requests for videoconference and central office hearings under the new system will be worked alongside with requests for hearings in the legacy system.

Representative Gregorio Sablan:

Representative Sablan would like to thank Karen Gooden, the Director of the Honolulu Regional Benefit and her team for improving VBA outreach to Saipan over the last year, including a comprehensive benefits workshop last August. VBA staff has also provided earlier notification of visits, including informing our staff which we then publicize in our weekly newsletter. It has been more than a year since VBA staff traveled to Tinian and Rota.

QUESTION 7: Please explain what (if any) plans the VA has to place staff in the Northern Marianas. If so, please outline if that person has the resources to serve veterans on all three islands.

VA Response: At this time, VA has no plans to place permanent staff in the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands (CNMI).

QUESTION 8: If there are no plans for permanent staff in Mr. Sablan's district, please detail VBA's plans for ensuring veterans in Saipan, Tinian, and Rota have direct access to VBA staff during FY 2019. Please detail how many VBA staff trips to the three islands will be funded in the FY 2019 request.

VA Response: The Honolulu RO conducts quarterly outreach visits to CNMI every year; these quarterly visits are planned and budgeted for in FYs 2018 and 2019. Additionally, the Honolulu RO conducted outreach in conjunction with the Northern Marianas Veterans Resource Fair 2018 April 4-6, 2018. VA is committed to ensuring we provide appropriate services to CNMI Veterans. We have worked with the Saipan Governor's Office of Veterans Services (GOVS) to hold VBA visits in the GOVS office, instead of at the VHA clinic, and allow GOVS staff to assist with claims.

QUESTION 9: Please detail what other efforts are being made to ensure veterans in the Northern Marianas are informed of the benefits and services provided through the VBA.

VA Response: The Honolulu RO serves Hawaii and the Western Pacific U.S. territories of Guam, and American Samoa, as well as the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands (Saipan, Tinian, and Rota). Benefit counselors and VR&E counselors provide quarterly outreach or itinerant visits. Itinerant visits are typically only for one day and are subject to available funding. Additionally, the Loan Guaranty and VR&E divisions provide itinerant services quarterly or as needed to service Specially Adapted Housing, Special Home Adaptation, or other program needs.

In April of 2018, the Honolulu RO participated in the Northern Marianas Veterans Resource Fair with Congressman Gregorio Kilili Camacho, the Veterans Health Administration and other organizations to offer education and career services, small business development training, vocational rehabilitation, employment assistance, legal aid, home loans, crisis support, disability assistance, and social services.