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November 13, 2012

Nancy J. Kessinger
Veterans Benefits Administration (20M35)
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

RE: OMB Control No. 2900-0744

Dear Ms. Kissinger,

This letter is in reference to OMB Control No. 2900-0744. The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Benefits continues to monitor the efforts of the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) call center.

I would like to start by highlighting some of the comments the Committee received on a request for comments regarding the VA call center on the Committee's official Facebook page:

Mr. Walter Shockley: the use of memorized lines and having no answers it is a waste to call them. I talked to as many as three different people on the same evening and receive three different answers about my claim. That tells me you have a problem. Some of these people cannot access you[r] claim correctly, nor can they read what is says, they need training. The worst thing is the required reading of the same line on every call.

Ms. Sandi Silarski: You mean other than the fact that some VA employees automatically assume that since I'm a woman, I can't possibly be a vet, so they just ask for my non-existent husband's information?

Ms. Eleanor Clary: ...long waits, and then they really cannot tell you much... gave up calling got sick of hearing "sorry--backlog".... wish I could tell my doctors and bill collectors that....

The Committee also conducted our own research by calling the VA 1-800 number and timed the projected wait times and the actual wait time. On the first day, after being initially disconnected and after waiting for an hour, it took roughly another hour and 45 minutes in total to reach a human call center representative. I have included the documentation from our House VA Committee test phone calls below:

Date	Time of Day	Estimated Wait Time	Time Answered	Actual Wait Time	Notes
10/11/2012	10:28 AM	45 minutes	N/A	59 minutes 50 secs	After waiting for 59 minutes and 50 seconds, the call was disconnected with the following statement "your call can not be completed at this time, please try again later."
10/11/2012	11:27 AM	Re-dialed the 1-800 number and told "to try again later"	N/A	N/A	
10/11/2012	11:28 AM	Called from personal cell phone 1 minute later and call was no longer blocked	N/A	N/A	
10/11/2012	11:29 AM	46 minutes	12:09 PM	45 minutes	40 minutes to speak to a human rep; Immediately asked for his supervisor at 12:09 pm, Got supervisor at 12:14 pm
10/11/2012	1:45 PM	49 minutes	2:26 PM	41 minutes	
10/11/2012	2:29 PM	47 minutes	3:31 PM	1 hour 1 minute	Asked for a supervisor to call me back directly. Supervisor called back a day later.
10/12/2012	1:32 PM	41 minutes	2:12 PM	40 minutes	

While this was not a strict scientific experiment, the information collected shows an overall lack of consistency in how the call center operates in their ability to answer calls. The one constant appears to be long wait times to speak to a representative. I can only imagine how frustrating this would be to a veteran who simply wants to speak with someone regarding the status of their claim.

Potential Improvements to call center:

1. Provide adequate training for the call center representatives:

Based on the Inspector General (IG) report from 2010 on VA's call center, the accuracy rate for a call center representative providing a correct answer to a veteran was 49%.

Additionally, the feedback we have received from veterans concludes that there is no consistency to the answers given by call center representatives. Although VA is working on scripts for some answers in an effort to show consistency, there must be a balance between the scripted response and personalized, accurate information that directly addresses the veteran's inquiry. One Committee staff member spoke to a call center supervisor regarding the training of call center representatives and while there is a current training program, the representatives are placed on the phones to directly answer questions from veterans before their eight week training period has concluded. A comprehensive training program with supervision for these representatives who are on the front lines of answering veterans' questions would increase the overall accuracy rate and would thereby improve the veterans' confidence in VA's call center.

2. One consolidated computer system:

Based on a recent trip to the national call center in St. Louis, Committee staff understands that nationally VA is rolling out the "uniformed desktop initiative" which would allow call center employees to use one interface to answer calls. According to VA, this pilot has proved successful, although no official data has been made available to support this. Although we believe that the uniformed desktop initiative is certainly a step in the right direction, careful monitoring of this system must continue to ensure maximum efficiency. For example, a Google-type search database may allow call center employees to access information pertaining to a veteran's claim more quickly. In addition, a more automated system to validate personally identifying information, while still protecting veterans' privacy, may also cut down on overall call times.

A consolidated computer system has the potential to reduce the amount of time that the veteran is on the phone with the representative since the representative is not searching in multiple locations for the veteran's data. Additionally, this would increase the morale for the call center representatives as they would be able to seamlessly provide answers to the veteran. (One call center supervisor anecdotally noted that the full time call center representatives frequently used all of their sick time due to the demands of the job). Overall, the calls would be completed and this would thereby decrease the overall wait time as the call center representatives would be able to handle more calls in a day.

3. Accountability for the call center representatives for inaccurate answers:

During the conversation between a Committee staff member and a VA call center supervisor, it became apparent that the supervision over the call center representatives only entails random monitoring approximately 5 calls per month. This is based on the numbers provided by VA on February 23, 2012, at the Salt Lake City call center, where there are 99 employees and that center handled approximately 2,769 daily calls. That averages to about 28 calls per representative per day. That means in an average month, a call center representative takes about 840 calls and only 5 of those calls are randomly monitored for accuracy.

Furthermore, if any of those five monitored calls do show an inaccurate answer from the representative, there is no additional training provided to avoid repeating the same mistake. The supervision level only increases to 20 randomly monitored calls per month. There should be a

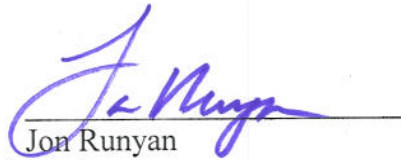
performance standard in place for the supervisors to adequately monitor the accuracy of the call center representative's answers.

While it would be impossible for a supervisor to monitor every call of every representative, VA could provide a "quality survey" at the end of the call where the veteran could provide direct feedback regarding their experience on the call. If there is a survey answer that is below the acceptable level, the supervisor could then review the call and proceed accordingly.

For many of our veterans, the VA call center is their only resource for receiving information regarding their claims. Although VA has undertaken a vast effort to encourage veterans to check the status of their claims via eBenefits, the fact remains that many veterans, particularly the elderly, simply prefer to talk to a live person. Therefore, it is extremely important that VA makes sure that the call center representatives on the front line are providing accurate and consistent data to the veteran.

I urge VA to review the current status of its call centers and implement new and efficient goals for improving accuracy and reducing the wait time. I look forward to continuing to work with you to ensure the best care and services for our nation's veterans.

Sincerely,



Jon Runyan
Chairman
House Veterans Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and
Memorial Affairs

JR/jms