



## St. Paul VA Regional Office SWS Site Visit Report



**Date:** December 5, 2017

**Location:** St. Paul VA Regional Office

**Dept. Rehab Committee Members:** Wilson Spence, Darrel Redepenning, Bill Brockberg, Roy Bressler and Dan Tengwall. Dept. Service Officer, Jeremy Wolfsteller.

**RE:** The American Legion Dept. Rehabilitation Committee is tasked with staying engaged with agencies that aid Minnesota veterans. The committee does this by conducting System Worth Saving Site Visits throughout the year. These locations include Sioux Falls, Fargo, St. Cloud and Minneapolis VA Healthcare Systems, St. Paul and Fargo Regional Offices, Minneapolis, Hastings, Luverne, Fergus Falls and Silver Bay Veterans Homes. Additional Site Visits are conducted at VA CBOC's, Vets Centers, and Minnesota nonprofits that serve veterans when the budget allows.

**Meeting Attendance:** Chairman Wilson Spence, Bill Brockberg, Darrel Redepenning, Roy Bressler, Dan Tengwall and Jeremy Wolfsteller. Director Graves and Executive Leadership.

### **St. Paul VA Regional Office Overview:**

VA's St. Paul Regional Benefit Office (RO) administers a variety of benefits and services, including Compensation, Loan Guaranty, Pension, and Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment for Veterans, Servicemembers, their families and survivors in Minnesota.

St. Paul RO also offers the following additional services:

- Counseling about eligibility for VA benefits and how to apply
- Information about VA health care and memorial benefits
- Outreach to Veterans, including those who are homeless or at risk for homelessness and older, minority, and women Veterans
- Assistance with applying for Specially Adapted Housing grants

The St. Paul Regional Office serves as the Regional Loan Center (RLC) responsible for all loan processing, Construction and Valuation, and Specially Adapted Housing (SAH) functions for all Veterans in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Iowa. The St. Paul RO is one of eight VA regional loan centers (RLCs) administering VA's Home Loan Guaranty program, which helps Veterans obtain mortgage loans from private lenders by guaranteeing a portion of the loan against loss. This program can also prevent Veterans from losing their homes during temporary financial difficulties. They serve Veterans in Minnesota (except for those in the counties of Becker, Beltrami, Clay, Clearwater, Kittson, Lake of the Woods, Mahnommen, Marshall, Norman, Ottertail, Pennington, Polk, Red Lake, Roseau, and Wilkin, which are served by the Fargo RO) LGY jurisdiction. They also assist with delinquent VA loans on a nationwide basis.

St. Paul is one of the three VA pension management centers (PMCs), which process annual eligibility verification reports and most other benefit adjustments for those receiving non-service-connected disability and death pensions and Dependency and Indemnity Compensation.

## 2017 St. Paul VA Regional Office System Worth Saving Site Visit

### Meeting Minutes:

- The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) overview, 56 Regional Offices with an estimated 13,150 employees, 4.8 million compensation (SC) and Dependence Indemnity Compensation (DIC) recipients, 64 billion in compensation paid out and an average of \$14,855 per veteran per year.
- Compensation and Pension benefits are all being worked in the VBA's National Work Queue (NWQ). Each Regional Office reports their current staff and availability for work which in turn dictates the workload that is directed to their facility for that given day. In FY17 the St. Paul RO processed 7,564 rating claims and 21,491 non-rating claims for Minnesota veterans. While the majority of cases were from other States seeing 23,489 rating claims and 40,779 non-rating claims for non-Minnesota veterans. Recently St. Paul was allocated 89 additional full-time employees (FTE) to focus on non-rating claims, i.e. (add or subtract dependents). These employees also work special issue claims like severance pay and Drill pay issues. St. Paul's FTE ceiling is now at 901 although the Veterans Service Center (VSC) and Pension Management Center are short around 30 FTE combined, but are bringing on new people every pay period. Mandatory overtime has been suspended until at least January 7, 2018, when Central Office will re-assess.
- In FY 2017 VBA took over much of the responsibility administering compensation and pension exams (C&P exams) although the Veterans Health Administration still operates a C&P office and exam clinic. This new responsibility is facilitated by contracts that were awarded for 6.8 billion dollars. The two VA contracts that schedule C&P exam appointments for Minnesota Veterans are Logistic Health Incorporate (LHI) and QTC Medical Services. (There are actually 5 contract vendors; LHI and QTC support the states within VBA's Midwest District). American Legion has identified some problems with these contract exam, such as some examiners are not providing adequate exams, LHI or QTC are scheduling multiple exams for the same day in different locations without enough time to get to both appointments. TAL brought this to the Director and they will be working to make sure the message is getting to higher level leadership and directly to the vendors.
- Nationally the claims inventory is around 331,000 with a back log (125 days pending or more) of 75,000. Although VA has decreased the number of claims and the time it takes to process a claim, their quality and accuracy levels have dropped slightly according to recent VA public data.

## 2017 St. Paul VA Regional Office System Worth Saving Site Visit

### Meeting Minutes Cont'd:

- *Nationally*, approximately 11% of claims are appealed with a Notice of Disagreement (NOD). Recently with the Appeals Modernization Act signed into law, the VA has rolled out a Rapid Appeals Modernization Program (RAMP). This new program is intended to split jurisdiction over compensation appeals between Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and the Board of Veterans Appeals (BVA) adding more complexity to the appeals process. This is expected to help reduce the legacy appeals backlog at BVA. RAMP only applies to legacy appeals (pending appeals) and will stop when the new legislation goes into effect in February 2019.
- RAMP provides veterans with the opportunity to participate in a multiple lane appeal process. A veteran can request a *supplemental review* where the veteran can add new material evidence at the local Regional Office for a new decision. The second option is a *Higher-Level Review* where veterans believe the VA made a wrong decision and wants a higher-level review of the previously made decision. Veterans will not be allowed to add new evidence when choosing the higher-level review. Veterans will be offered the opportunity to opt-into the RAMP program, but must wait for a letter asking if they want to do so.
- The American Legion passed two Minnesota resolutions during its 2017 National Convention. One request more transparency from the VA to the Veteran Service Organizations that represent veterans with their benefits. When VA does anything with a claim, the POA should be notified to ensure representation can be provided. The other resolution asks for a 48-business hour review period vs a 48-hour review period on claims before they have been promulgated. There're multiple problems with the 48-hour review period for POA's. Now that VA has moved paperless and to a National Work Queue (NWQ) and claims are worked anywhere in the Nation, sometimes 48 hours is not enough time for the POA to find all cases in the 48-hour ready to review stage because VA fails to notify the POA within its own Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS). The second is that the button that is provided in case the POA finds an error does not notify anybody or stop the claim from being promulgated on. St. Paul leadership is aware of this and has since started working on a suggested resolution to submit to Central Office for consideration.

**Chairman:** Wilson Spence

**Secretary:** Jeremy Wolfsteller

