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## State Veterans Stuck In Seven-Month Backlog On Disability Claims

February 05, 2013 | By PEGGY MCCARTHY, Conn. Health I-Team Writer, The Hartford Courant

Gene Trotman, 59, of Waterbury, has been fighting for so long to get disability benefits from the Veterans Benefits Administration that he now wonders if "maybe they're waiting for me to die."

Trotman, an Air Force veteran who served in the early 1970s, initially sought benefits in 1991 for a psychiatric condition. After several denials, he was finally approved for disability compensation last July. But he still hasn't received any [money](#). He is waiting for the Veterans Benefits Administration's Hartford Regional Office to complete the process that determines how much he will get.



Gene Trotman, of Waterbury, an Air Force veteran, has been fighting for... (CLDE POISSON | cpoisson@courant.com )

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Connecticut veterans typically wait more than seven months, an average of 213 days, to have their claims processed, according to U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs figures compiled by the Center for Investigative Reporting.

As of Jan. 28, a total of 1,364 state veterans' cases were backlogged out of 2,750 who have filed claims, the numbers show. Waits longer than 125 days are considered backlogged. For appeals of VBA decisions, the average wait is more than three years — 1,181 days.

Nationally, there are 821,966 claims pending, and 71 percent (585,234) are backlogged, with an average wait time of nine months, figures show.

The VA has vowed to improve. "We recognize that too many veterans are waiting too long to get the benefits they have earned, and this is unacceptable," VA Undersecretary for Benefits Allison A. Hickey said in a recent press release.

The VA's goal is that by July 2015 no veteran will wait more than 125 days for a disability claim to be processed. However, much skepticism has been expressed about whether that can happen.

The congressional Government Accountability Office (GAO), which issued a December report on the delays, and State Veterans Affairs Commissioner Linda S. Schwartz are among those raising questions about whether the goal can be reached.

"At least, they have a goal," Schwartz said, but she pointed out the VA's plan to take an "archaic" paper system to a computerized one is an enormous task. "While the rest of the world has moved on to higher technology, the VA has a very large curve. They're really behind the eight ball," she said.

As of mid-January, 18 VBA regional offices, including Hartford, have begun the switch to a new computerized system, while the other 38 are expected to do so by the end of the year, according to a recent VA press release.

The GAO warned that backlogs could continue because the VA hasn't established a system to effectively evaluate whether its initiatives are working. "The agency risks spending limited resources on initiatives that may not speed up disability claims and appeals processes," the GAO report concluded.

The report adds, "Without improved evidence gathering, VBA may struggle to meet its goal of processing all compensation claims within its 125 day goal by 2015."

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The backlog isn't all due to VBA shortcomings. Additional illnesses are being covered for veterans of the Vietnam and Gulf Wars in connection with Agent Orange and Gulf War Illness, respectively. Many of the 2.4 million veterans who served in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are returning with multiple and debilitating illnesses and injuries. The GAO report states that 1 million service members are expected to leave the military in the next five years.

"The VA is overrun with claims," said Derek Coy, development coordinator for the nonprofit Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. Coy, an Iraq War Marine, waited 13 months for his disability claim to be processed in Texas, even though he had "all my ducks in a row" in his claim. He suffered shoulder and knee injuries, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

John Shepard, a Vietnam War Army veteran from New Haven with PTSD, filed a claim in December with help from the Yale Law School Veterans Legal Services Clinic. VBA staff at the Hartford office told the clinic that the claim would be processed in six to 12 months.

Paul Sullivan, a board member of the nonprofit Veterans for Common Sense, said the VA should have anticipated the increased caseload from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. "The VA knew this was going to happen and did nothing to improve the system to handle the influx," he said.

Schwartz said she has heard of veterans submitting claims for as many as 50 injuries, which are reviewed one at a time, making the process longer.

Sullivan said that while waiting for claims decisions, "veterans are losing their houses to foreclosure, being evicted from apartments, having cars repossessed, can't pay their bills and their credit is being destroyed."

According to Veterans for Common Sense, nearly 20,000 families received disability benefits last year after veterans, waiting for benefits, died. "That's a shocking disgrace that so many veterans died while waiting on VA claims," the group said in a statement.

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