

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

May 28, 2010

The Honorable Bob Filner
Chairman
House Veterans Affairs Committee
335 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Steve Buyer
Ranking Member
House Veterans Affairs Committee
335 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable John Hall
Chairman
DAMA Subcommittee
335 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Doug Lamborn
Ranking Member
DAMA Subcommittee
335 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Gentlemen,

As you know, under current Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) policies, our disabled veterans and their survivors face numerous challenges when applying for the disability compensation and pension benefits that they have earned through their service to this nation. Processing times are far too long. Rating decisions are often wrongly or inaccurately decided. In short, it is time to reform the veterans' benefits approval system, and we stand ready to assist you in this endeavor.

Like you, we believe that disabled veterans and their survivors should be able to apply for benefits through a simple, uniform and modern IT-based process. Active duty service members, including activated guard and reserve, should be able to apply for benefits before discharge through a system that produces accurate decisions by the time of their discharge.

VA's continued reliance on a cumbersome paper-based system, beginning with a 23-page application, to review and evaluate claims for disability compensation and pension only adds to the delay. By improving the way the VA acquires its IT systems, we can get to the root problem of the claims backlog.

Additionally, it is our belief that allowing more VA certified county and state veterans' advocates' access to veterans' medical and personnel records will inevitably create better, more accurate disability claims and will thus reduce the claims backlog.

We also believe that a greater focus must be placed on reaching accurate outcomes. VA's Inspector General reported in March 2009 that almost a quarter (22%) of all veterans' claims for disability compensation were decided incorrectly in the 12-month period reviewed, affecting over 200,000 veterans and their families. Strict oversight of the Veterans Benefits Administration's (VBA) new changes that focus on metrics of success to reflect quality, not just quantity, would go a long way towards solving some of these problems.

Our veterans and survivors deserve a top quality disability claims system. The time to act is now, and we stand ready to assist you on the following policy and legislative recommendations:

1. Work with the House Armed Services Committee to analyze and implement the appropriate recommendations made by the 2006 GAO study on the Benefits Delivery at Discharge program.
2. Improve the transparency of the claims notification system to allow a veteran or surviving spouse to gain more detailed information on the in-progress and final status of a submitted claim. Additionally, the methods of claims notification such as automated letter mailings are cumbersome and costly. If the VA is to truly transform itself into a 21st Century agency, it must develop flexible, economical, and user friendly IT solutions that make this information accessible to veterans online.
3. Develop a solution that will allow certified rural veterans' service officers and/or those certified veterans' service officers not working in a VA Regional Office access to all VA records systems.
4. Study, analyze and, ultimately, reform the VA acquisitions process to allow for quicker and more effective acquisition of IT solutions for the disability claims system.
5. Ensure the VBA's efforts to reform its method for measuring employee performance actually measure and reward quality of results, not just quantity, and provide sufficient training of VA's management and workforce to achieve this outcome.

We look forward to working with the committee and the House Armed Services Committee to achieve common sense solutions to disability claims reform.

Respectfully,



Tim Walz
Member of Congress



Peter King
Member of Congress

Martin Heinrich
Member of Congress



Michael McCaul
Member of Congress



Patrick Kennedy
Member of Congress



Ben Luján
Member of Congress



Bill Owens
Member of Congress



Betsy Markey
Member of Congress



Collin Peterson
Member of Congress



Edolphus Towns
Member of Congress



Larry Kissell
Member of Congress



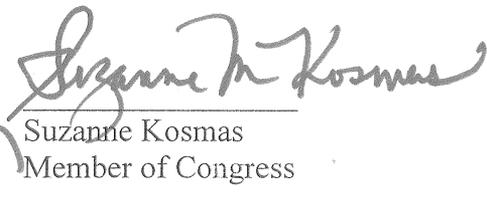
Bruce Braley
Member of Congress



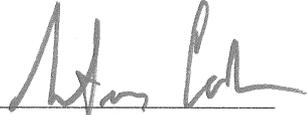
Keith Ellison
Member of Congress



Shelley Berkley
Member of Congress



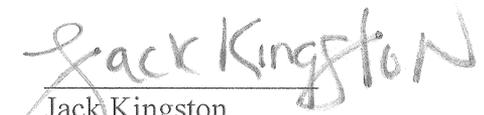
Suzanne Kosmas
Member of Congress



Steve Cohen
Member of Congress



Steve Austria
Member of Congress



Jack Kingston
Member of Congress



Joe Baca
Member of Congress



Ken Calvert
Member of Congress



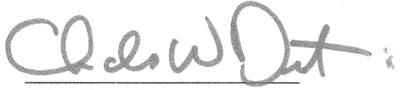
Vernon J. Ehlers
Member of Congress



Bart Stupak
Member of Congress



Doris Matsui
Member of Congress



Charles Dent
Member of Congress

Roscoe Bartlett
Member of Congress

Phil Hare
Member of Congress

Steve Rothman
Member of Congress

Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Member of Congress

Frank Kratovil, Jr.
Member of Congress

Howard Coble
Member of Congress

Barbara Lee
Member of Congress

James McGovern
Member of Congress

Dan Boren
Member of Congress

Rodney Frelinghuysen
Member of Congress

Rick Larsen
Member of Congress

Sue Myrick
Member of Congress

Jean Schmidt
Member of Congress

Leonard Boswell
Member of Congress

Fred Upton
Member of Congress

Tom McClintock
Member of Congress

Harold Rogers
Member of Congress

Steve Driehaus
Member of Congress

Alan Grayson
Member of Congress

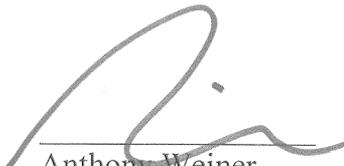
Gary Peters
Member of Congress

Roy Blunt
Member of Congress

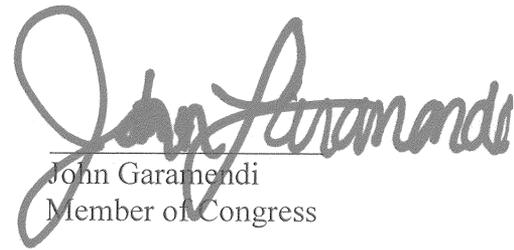
Tom Latham
Member of Congress

Mike Michaud
Member of Congress

Peter Welch
Member of Congress

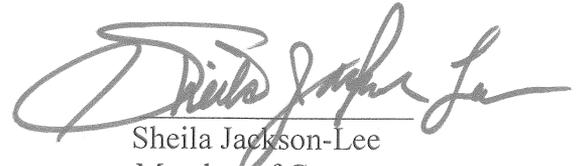

Anthony Weiner
Member of Congress

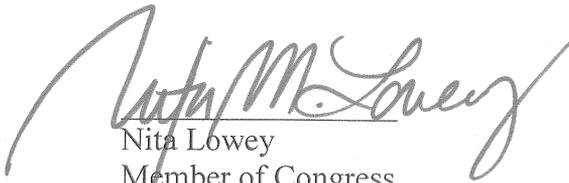

Tammy Baldwin
Member of Congress


John Garamendi
Member of Congress


Chris Lee
Member of Congress


Dina Titus
Member of Congress


Sheila Jackson-Lee
Member of Congress


Nita Lowey
Member of Congress


Scott Murphy
Member of Congress


Ed Perlmutter
Member of Congress


Robert Wittman
Member of Congress


Ahn "Joseph" Cao
Member of Congress


Rush Holt
Member of Congress


Mike McIntyre
Member of Congress

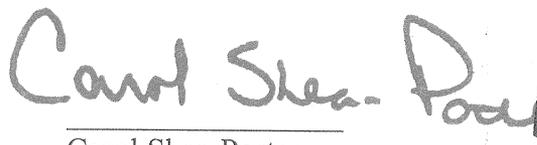

Mark Schauer
Member of Congress

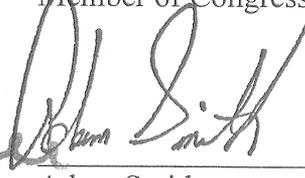

Joe Courtney
Member of Congress

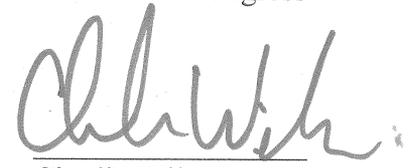

Carolyn Kilpatrick
Member of Congress


Aaron Schock
Member of Congress


Paul Hodes
Member of Congress


Carol Shea-Porter
Member of Congress


Adam Smith
Member of Congress


Charlie Wilson
Member of Congress

Michael R. Turner

Mike Turner
Member of Congress

Joe Donnelly

Joe Donnelly
Member of Congress

Stephen A. Lynch

Stephen Lynch
Member of Congress

Ron Klein

Ron Klein
Member of Congress