



AFGE

Congressional Testimony

STATEMENT BY

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WINSTON-SALEM, NORTH CAROLINA

ON BEHALF OF

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES
AND
AFGE NATIONAL VETERANS AFFAIRS COUNCIL

BEFORE

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS

ON

EXAMINING TRAINING REQUIREMENTS OF VETERANS BENEFITS
ADMINISTRATION CLAIMS PROCESSING PERSONNEL

SEPTEMBER 16, 2010

American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO
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Dear Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of AFGE and the National VA Council regarding VBA training requirements for claims processing personnel. Training is an issue of paramount importance which has a direct impact on the VBA's ability to meet its operational goals and mission. Effective training is an essential component of any VBA effort to increase the timeliness, accuracy and consistency of claims processing. Ultimately, a weak training program for claims processing personnel is a disservice to veterans whose claims are determined with greater delay and less accuracy.

Based on my experiences as a Rating Specialist and Shop Steward, and a participant in several joint labor management committees, I concur with GAO's findings in its April 2010 report of multiple deficiencies in VBA's mandatory training program for experienced claims processors. As discussed below, new employee training also suffers from shortcuts and quality gaps.

I. Training for Experienced Claims Processors

Consistent with GAO's findings, the mandatory annual training program at the Winston-Salem Regional Office (RO) is deficient in terms of the amount of training provided, content of the curriculum and timeliness.

Amount of Training Provided:

Currently, it is very difficult for employees to receive their full 85 hours of mandatory training, given the constant production pressures they face. VBA

mandates 85 hours of annual training for all claims processing employees who have completed Challenge Training. Of these 85 hours of mandatory training, 40 hours are devoted to Core Technical Training Requirement (CTTR) topics selected by VBA (covering 72 topics for Veterans Service Representatives (VSR) and 47 topics for Rating Specialists (RVSRs)) and 20 hours for topics selected by the Regional office (RO) from the CTTR topics. The remaining 25 hours are topics which the individual ROs elect to train on as well as ancillary administrative requirements such as cyber security and ethics. In some cases, training may also be provided at Team Meetings to cover issues that have been identified during a Veteran Service Center Manager conference call.

Curriculum Content:

The GAO survey found that an average of 46 percent of employees experienced difficulties in completing this training. Based on my experience, I would dare say this percentage is actually greater and was merely under reported. Specifically when asked, a majority of employees at my office report concerns on achieving the mandatory training requirements when faced with increased workload and production.

The current CTTR training which is mandated for Claims processors is often times too remedial, specifically it focuses on issues such as common law marriage for VSRs and building a glossary for RVSRs. The majority of this CTTR training is conducted via self directed written materials with no interaction with Subject Matter Experts (SME). The employee merely completes the review of the

information and certifies through the Learning Management System (LMS) that the training was completed. When faced with the dilemma of completing the training or completing work to meet production requirements, employees feel compelled to complete the additional production.

The RO based mandatory training program also fails to target specific complex issues which are necessary for claims processors to ensure accuracy of the work being produced. While continued training is necessary to ensure the effectiveness of the work force, the need for training quality surpasses the quantity of training. The majority of the issues I was tasked with this year were items which were more appropriately identified for employees within the first two years of employment such as how to write a clear and concise rating decision and review of local quality findings, but omitting more complex issues such as evaluating demyelinating diseases and residuals of blast injuries.

Too little classroom training:

Online training should not fully replace classroom training. Currently, the majority of Core Technical Training Requirements training is provided via self directed computer based materials with no interaction with Subject Matter Experts. This requires the claims processor to review, interpret and understand the material alone. Validation of this training is also completed through LMS self-certification.

Another troubling training shortcut is the use of emails to explain complex new concepts, in lieu of more detailed, effective instruction. AFGE members have reported that they have been asked to learn new concepts via email with only a fraction of the excluded time actually needed to effectively learn and accurately apply these training materials.

Quality of Instruction:

This quality of training issue is further impacted by the limited formal training provided to instructors. GAO found that only one in four claims processors who participated in training had received formal instructor training. This is true at the VARO Winston Salem, as merely being promoted to the Decision Review Officer or Super Senior VSR position automatically requires performance as instructors.

Given the growing problem of inexperienced instructors to provide training to claims processing personnel, it is all the more urgent that instructors receive sufficient instructor development. Unfortunately, at my RO, there is no Instructor training for employees who are thrust into this position.

Timeliness of training:

Timing of training is not adequate to meet the demands of the work performed. In some cases training has been delayed for months to years following significant changes, and in some cases, no training was received. This puts the claims processors, and veterans, at a substantial disadvantage. With the

changes in the presumptive disabilities associated with Agent Orange exposure, VBA directed ischemic heart disease training. To date, this training has not occurred at my RO.

Another example pertains to the change in the schedule for rating eye disabilities. That schedule was issued on February 13, 2009 but to date, no formal training has been conducted at my RO.

II. New Employee Training

Since 2005, VBA has increased staffing by over 4,000 new individuals to assist with the claims process. This enormous influx of new employees makes it all the more critical that VBA improve both its new employee training and ongoing training programs.

New employees participate in VBA's Challenge Training, which consists of three phases. Phase 1 is based at the RO; for RVSRs the focus is on introducing the employee to aspects of claims processes and for VSRs, on the basics of the claims process and the programs utilized. Phase 2 is centralized classroom training which focuses more on the essential aspects of performing the assigned tasks.

Phase 3 is more topic focused and conducted at the individual employee's station. Phase 3 involves working with live claims with half of the day focused on training and the other half focused on production. The bulk of new employee training is conducted during Phase 3 at the individual's station based on

centralized curriculum identified by VBA. (I am currently participating in a VBA Training Site Visit Team commissioned by the Undersecretary for Benefits that is focusing on implementation of and compliance with Phase 3 training; the work of this group is still in the early stages.)

One of the most significant flaws in the Challenge Training program is the absence of any system to effectively monitor the completion of the two RO-based portions of the training (Phases 1 and 3). Prior to participation in Centralized Phase 2, employees are required to complete and certify that they have received specific training, but many participants are not able to do so. Similarly, when they return from centralized training, they are often unable to certify completion of Phase 3 training.

As long as managers are under pressure to meet production quotas at all costs, they will rush new employees who have not been adequately trained into production. AFGE has received reports of new employees processing cases independently only six weeks after returning from Phase 2 classroom training. Managers exacerbate this by providing new employees with a limited range of easier cases, depriving them of valuable experience over the long run.

AFGE members also report problems with the curriculum in Phase 2. First, time is wasted teaching them concepts that they already learned in Phase 1. Second, the curriculum includes live cases that are out of date, and therefore, have been decided incorrectly, yet they are still used for new employee instruction.

Phase 3 training is designed to be instructor lead, and topic specific. The problem lies within the certification and validation of completion of the training. Too often, when new employees return to the RO for Phase 3 training, they get too little supervision or face to face training. Instead, they are left on their own to review complex materials. More generally, over the years, VBA has significantly reduced the amount of classroom training conducted at the ROs.

It is also troubling that often the cases processed by new employees are not reviewed on a timely basis. AFGE members from other ROs report that senior employees are regularly taken off production to conduct these reviews and because of competing pressures, many new employees have to wait three to four months to find out if they are making accurate determinations.

Conclusion

If the VA is to become a model 21st century agency, then this must begin at the base level with the training provided to the employees. The Agency must alter the mindset, and begin to focus on the quality of training, versus the quantity of training. Unless the agency is willing to invest the time and energy to meet the needs of the employees, the agency is doomed to fail in meeting our mission.

AFGE offers the following recommendations to the Subcommittee:

- Establish performance measures and incentives to ensure that managers avoid training shortcut in order to boost production. I cannot recall a single instance of any VBA manager who has ever

been disciplined, demoted, or formally reprimanded for failing to adequately train an employee.;

- Commission a group of Subject Matter Experts, including front line employees, veteran' groups and other stakeholders, to review all current training programs and provide recommendations for improvement. (The team recently commission by the VBA Undersecretary is only reviewing Phase 3 of the Challenge training program).;
- Develop a standardized plan to annually review and update training topics to better reflect the trends in claims processing.;
- Establish an effective monitoring system for tracking compliance with training. The current LMS certification program is faulty as self certification does not validate completion.;
- Develop clear guidelines on what should and should not be credited toward training requirements. Frequently, during team meetings at my RO, one issue is identified from a recent Office of Field Operations or Veteran Service Center Manager call and at the completion of the meeting, the supervisor requires that the meeting be listed as training.

Thank you.

BIOGRAPHY

Jimmy F. Sims Jr. began working in the area of veterans' benefits in 1998 as a State Veterans Service Officer for the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs, Madison County Alabama. Subsequently, Mr. Sims was accredited by the VA as a Representative for 13 organizations and served as a Department Service Officer for the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers for Alabama. He also served as a National Training Officer and Editor of the Education and Training Manual for the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers from 2000 through 2002.

Mr. Sims began working for the VA in 2002 as a Rating Veterans Service Representative. He has served on the both Rating Boards, as a member of the Benefits Delivery at Discharge for 3 years, and currently works in Supplemental Paperless Claims Processing.

Mr. Sims is a veteran who is proud to serve other veterans through his work at VBA. From 1982 to 1992, Mr. Sims served in the U.S. Coast Guard as a Radarman and Yeoman and was discharged due to disability.

September 16, 2010

The Honorable John Hall, Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and
Memorial Affairs
335 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Hall:

The American Federation of Government Employees has not received any federal grants or contracts, during this year or in the last two years, from any agency or program relevant to the subject of the September 16, 2008 hearing of the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs concerning the Veterans Benefits Administration's Training Requirements for Claims Processing Personnel.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Beth Moten". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Beth Moten
Legislative and Political Director