



## VA REGIONAL OFFICE, HARTFORD, CONN.

**Date:** Aug. 15 - 16, 2019

**Attendees:** Claims Services Coordinator Melinda Staton

**Purpose:** To Conduct a R.O.A.R. Visit and Provide Feedback to VA Regional Office Executive and Senior Leadership

### Discussion:

The American Legion visited the Hartford, Conn., Veterans Affairs Regional Office (VARO) from Aug. 15-16, 2019. This year's focus for the Regional Office Action Review (ROAR) continues to be the impact of the National Work Queue (NWQ) and the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) work-credit system on the adjudication of veterans' claims.

The purpose of this visit was to review the service-connected disability compensation claims-processing function. Before the implementation of NWQ, the Hartford VARO was primarily responsible for service-connected disability compensation claims for veterans residing in Hartford, Conn. However, under the NWQ, claims are assigned to Regional Offices (ROs) based on capacity and workload.

The point of contact for this visit was Leo Nunes, Change Management Agent for the Hartford, RO. The American Legion staff met with a highly professional and courteous leadership team that proudly presented themselves as "small but mighty Hartford, Conn." The visit began with a briefing by Regional Office Director Suzanne DeNeau-Galley and other members of the RO leadership team. The team briefed national staff on the service-center operations in the Hartford RO, followed by a tour of the facility and employee interviews.

### Productivity

As of July 31, 2019, the Hartford RO appeals inventory consisted of 1,796 appeals, 294 pending appeals at the Board of Veterans Appeals and 129 appeals returned on remand. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2018, the Hartford RO adjudicated a total of 9,255 rated claims and 2,822 non-rated claims. The average time in queue is 2.1 days for initial development and 2.2 days for supplemental claims.

### Top 3 Rating Quality Errors:

1. B2, compliance obtaining all indicated evidence prior to deciding claim
2. C2, ensuring percentage evaluation assigned is correct
3. D1, ensuring effective dates affecting payment are correct

### Top 3 Authorization Quality Errors:

1. Dependency
2. System compliance
3. Ensuring withholding reductions are correctly implemented

To correct these errors, the Quality Review Team Coach conducts a monthly analysis to determine the most frequent quality errors then provides training on specific errors to reduce reoccurring errors. The RO also uses In-Process Reviews (IPR) as a non-punitive approach to identify errors during the claims process specific to employees. The IPR process helps to identify and correct errors before completing the claim. This enables the employee to understand the error and learn in the process.

### National Work Queue & Staff Interviews:

Leadership sentiment is that "at this time, adequate and efficient workload management is helping to mitigate any challenges presented through NWQ. More specific to the RO are the unique challenges that a co-located RO and VA Medical Center present. On any given day, staff provides services to an average of 60 veterans and beneficiaries. The volume of customers served is significantly increased based on ease of access from the VA Medical Center patients."

The Hartford RO leadership team members expressed that they are continually looking for opportunities to partner with The American Legion. Recent customer-service inquiries have identified a potential opportunity for VA to provide informational briefings to American Legion posts. This opportunity would ensure representatives are equipped with sufficient information to help advocate for veterans.

National staff was afforded the opportunity to interview 10 Veterans Service Center staff during the ROAR visit. Topics included: NWQ, leadership access, timeliness and accuracy of information, production standards and work-credit system, employee training and employee/leadership relations.

All employees expressed that their No. 1 priority is to ensure veterans and their family members receive all benefits they are entitled to. Employees were service-minded, veteran-focused and personally fulfilled. The employees expressed appreciation for the positive work culture at the Hartford RO, which results in employees feeling a sense of value. The Hartford RO leadership consistently conducts team meetings, provides constructive feedback on a daily basis, actively listens and trusts employees to get their work completed in a timely manner. These practices, coupled with consistent demonstration of servant leadership toward employees continue to result in the Hartford RO's success.



### **Work Credit System**

The Work Credit System received mixed reviews. Employees who were able to meet their standards expressed that this often came with a cost. These include feeling rushed and having to choose production over quality, especially when working on complex claims. Overall, most of the employees interviewed believed the standards were fair but not balanced due to the way credit is weighed against certain tasks. Employees expressed that adjustments need to line up with changes.

Employees expressed frustration with the issue of rework (having to complete work that was not done by the prior station). Employees believe that they should be compensated for the amount of rework often required on a daily basis to correct a claim. They also believe the prior station should hold the employee accountable for errors and omissions in the development process.

### **Training and Quality**

Employee sentiment regarding local training was positive. Employees believe they receive training that is consistent and effective. Employees are allowed to ask questions during local training and the local Quality Review Team (QRT) provides frequent updates to employees. Employees find the local QRT roundtables to be helpful and would like for these to be extended to at least 45 minutes due to all the changes which frequently occur weekly. Overall, employees expressed that the Hartford RO has one of the best programs in the country.

Employees assess that the quality of work across regional offices still varies. Some trends include missed development, properly applying AMA laws and regulations, non-rating issues and insufficient and/or inadequate exams. Additionally, employees are ordering exams when they are not required or exams are not ordered when required. These trends tend to result in quality and production errors, rework, deferrals and claim-processing delays.

### **Leadership and Employee Relations**

Overall, employees felt comfortable discussing issues and concerns with local leadership and their direct supervisors. On the other hand, some VSRs and RVSRs expressed being

overwhelmed and stressed. Employees agreed that they receive timely information timely but there is not enough time to actually read, process and internalize material changes.

### **DSO**

Claims Services Coordinator Melinda Staton visited with the Department Service Officer for Connecticut, K. Robert Lewis. Lewis has served the Connecticut office with professionalism, integrity, and genuine compassion for veterans, their family members and survivors. Staton and Lewis discussed the strong partnership between The American Legion, Department of Connecticut, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). The American Legion Department of Connecticut DSO was lauded for the positive and forthright manner in which he and staff communicate with the Hartford RO.

### **Quality Review**

The American Legion reviewed a total of 48 cases (2 case files did not contain information). Out of 48 cases reviewed, 9 contained errors.

### **Conclusion**

The American Legion appreciates the accommodations of the Hartford Regional Office. On behalf of The American Legion, I thank you and your staff for your hospitality and support during our ROAR visit.

Respectfully Submitted by,

Melinda Staton  
Claims Services Coordinator  
The American Legion