

**National Association of County  
Veterans Service Officers**

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**Testimony of  
George Hunt, President**

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VA/ County Veterans Service Officers  
partnership for the reduction of backlogged  
veterans claims

**June 6, 2002**

# Testimony of **George Hunt, President** National Association of County Veterans Service Officers

Good morning Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, it is truly my honor to be here before your committee. As President of the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers, I am here today, to comment on the:

- ✓ The October 2001 Special Taskforce Report on VA Claims Processing;
- ✓ The VA Backlog of Pending Claims; and
- ✓ Recommendations for the Creation of a New Federal/State/Local Government Partnerships.

Veterans are dying before they have the opportunity to receive the benefits they earned through service and sacrifice. Sadly, they are dying, sometimes from their service connected injuries, before their claims can get through our department of veterans affairs adjudication process.

A backlog, consisting of over 525,000 claims, is causing veterans to wait, in some cases, more than a year to have their claims reviewed and adjudicated by the VA.

- ✓ **“dying while waiting”** is not acceptable for the men and women who placed themselves in harm’s way for our great nation.
- ✓ **“dying while waiting”** is not acceptable for the World War II generation who saved our world from totalitarianism.
- ✓ **“dying while waiting”** is not acceptable for the men who braved the cold at the Chosin Reservoir or the brave men who came ashore at Inchon, Korea.
- ✓ **“dying while waiting”** is a travesty that can be reconciled.
- ✓ **“dying while waiting”** is a sad epitaph for a veteran to have on their headstone.

Our nation’s veterans are dying at a rate of over 1,000 veterans a day and the backlog is over 500,000 cases.

There are over 25 million honorably discharged veterans of the armed forces of the United States and a large percentage of those veterans are 70 plus years of age.

It is the responsibility of the United States government to live up to promises that were made and accepted. Promises that included medical care and compensation for illnesses and wounds sustained in defense of freedom. Together we must develop a mechanism for solutions, so that no more veterans **“die while waiting”**.

The National Association of County Veterans Service Officers is an organization made up of local government employees. Local government employees that believe we can help the Department of Veterans Affairs reduce the backlog and better serve our veterans.

We work for the local government offices and are tasked with assisting veterans in developing and processing their claims. County Veterans Service Offices exist to serve veterans and partner with the National Service Organizations and the Department of Veterans Affairs to serve veterans.

Our member County Veteran Service Officers are present in 37 of our 50 states and located in over 700 local communities. This readily available workforce represents approximately 2,400 full time employees that are available to partner with Department of Veterans Affairs to speed the process of claims development.

The National Association of County Veterans Service Officers has been in existence since 1990, primarily as a vehicle to provide continuing education and accreditation training in Department of Veterans Affairs' procedures and regulations governing veterans' benefits. The Association provides basic and advanced training for County Veterans Service Offices and also serves as a vehicle for them to obtain national accreditation with the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The National Association of County Veterans Service Officers provides continuing education training to make sure the latest information and newest technology is available to County Veterans Service Officers nation-wide. The Association conducts an annual training conference offering 32 hours of training in the latest VA rules, regulations and case law associated changes to those regulations that impact on veterans and their claims.

In addition, the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers provides regional training in an effort to provide training for as many County Veterans Service Offices as possible, so that the very best service may be provided to our nation's veterans.

Members of the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers stand ready to partner with the Department of Veterans Affairs in order to eliminate the backlog of claims hurting our veterans.

First, we propose partnering to significantly reduce the current backlog of veterans claims. We suggest that the Department of Veterans Affairs segregate backlogged claims that require development and refer the claims to the nearest county office for development. The claim should be accompanied with list identifying the information that is lacking and what is needed to make the claim "Ready to Rate." We suggest a check off list and color coding by type of the claim for ease in identification, when referred back to the VA for decision and rating.

When the County Veterans Service Officer receives a referred claim, they will make personal contact with the veteran or dependent, explain the situation and develop the claim. Once the claim has been fully developed, the claim would be submitted to the Department of Veterans Affairs with the check off list completed indicating the claim is "Ready to Rate." This will dramatically increase the speed at which a claim could be developed and returned to the VA for rating and decision.

Second, we propose a partnership in the way new claims are developed. As a local advocate, County Veterans Service Officers are required to protect the rights and benefits of veterans, dependents and survivors. In order to protect these rights and benefits, CVSOs must file an “informal” claim with the Department of Veterans Affairs prior to the end of the month after interview and the VA logs in the claim and “date stamps” it. This is an important date, as it constitutes when the veteran, dependent or survivor actually becomes eligible for the benefits. This “date stamp” also determines the date in which a retro-active payment for any future granted benefit will begin.

In concept, this protects the veteran, but creates a situation that requires the Department of Veterans Affairs to handle the claim **more than once**. This also triggers the Department of Veterans Affairs “duty to assist” the veteran in developing the claim. In short, this mechanism creates a “duplication of effort” and is a substantial cause of the current backlog.

Informal claims submitted for the purpose of safeguarding the veterans rights to benefits, have a tendency to bog down an already overloaded system. If VA policies and procedures were changes to allow the County Veterans Service Officer, **a branch of local government**, the authority to “date stamp” (protecting the veterans right to benefits) and then fully develop the claim, the **duplication of effort would disappear**. This change will dramatically streamline the claims process and allow the veteran,

dependent or survivor claims to be decided in a more efficient manner and ultimately reduce the backlog.

With 2,400 potential full time employees located throughout this country, ready, willing and able to assist the Department of Veterans Affairs, I believe that the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers stands the best real chance for the Department of Veterans Affairs to substantially reduce the backlog without committing to lengthy process of hiring and training new employees.

No solution to the backlog of the Department of Veterans Affairs is without cost. The use of existing highly trained local governmental employees greatly reduces the cost to the Department of Veterans Affairs. The National Association of County Veterans Service Officers suggest a three year pilot program and local government funding in the amount of \$70 million for the counties to augment, but not supplant, their existing budgets. This funding could be allocated based on veterans population and be directed to counties through State Departments of Veterans Affairs through block grants which allow a minimal administrative overhead. This would insure accountability and allow the states to administer the funding in such a way as to not financially impact the individual states.

The National Association of County Veterans Service Officers believe that an education clause should be written into the federal/state/local partnership agreement requiring that a portion of the funding be used for CVSO attendance in educational programs sponsored by or equivalent to the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers annual

continuing education and accreditation training. This will insure a level of expertise is maintained and shorten the turn around time for county development of “Ready to Rate” claims which will continue to reduce the backlog and speed service to veterans.

Information is an essential requirement, in our opinion, and we suggest that access to veteran’s information contained in the Benefits Delivery Network (BDN) be provided to counties in order to provide the best possible cooperation between the partners and service to veterans. This would allow County Veterans Service Offices nation-wide to gain on-line access to client information contained in the VA Database and use this information in developing claims to assist in backlog reduction.

The National Association of County Veterans Service Officers is grateful for this opportunity to testify to the House Subcommittee on Veterans Benefits. We believe that this proposal would develop an unprecedented partnership between the county and federal government that could lead to other information sharing and much better service to the veteran, dependent or survivor. If we work together, I believe that veterans and dependents will not be left **“dying while waiting”**

In Closing, the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers recommends that:

- Legislation called the “Department of Veterans Affairs Claims Backlog Reduction Act of 2002” be introduced to authorize \$70 million block grant funding, on a 3 year pilot project basis, for County Veterans Service Officers;
- The Department of Veterans Affairs be directed to issue Federal/State/Local federally funded block grants, allocated to states based on veterans population, for the purposes of creating a new partnership and reducing the current backlog of veterans claims;
- The Department of Veterans Affairs be directed to create procedures for referring backlogged veterans claims to partnering County Veterans Service Offices for development of veterans’ claims and referral back to the VA for decision and rating.
- An allocation be included for State Department of Veterans Affairs to receive a minimal (2-3%) administrative overhead allocation to cover state costs and for County Veterans Service Officers to receive an education and training allocation to maintain their proficiency.

Thank you for your time and attention.