



THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON

May 13, 2011

The Honorable Al Franken
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Franken:

Thank you for your letter regarding your concerns about the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Fast Track Claims Processing System (Fast Track). I apologize for the delay in responding.

Fast Track was developed and implemented following my October 13, 2009, decision to add Parkinson's disease, chronic B-cell leukemias, and ischemic heart disease to the list of diseases associated with exposure to certain herbicide agents, such as Agent Orange. It is a Web-based, automated system specifically designed to process new disability compensation claims for these three new presumptive conditions. Fast Track has been operational since October 29, 2010, and Veterans may file claims for these conditions through the Web-based portal or by mail or fax to their VA regional office or the Fast Track intake facility in Rocket Center, West Virginia. As of May 6, 2011, over 3,200 new claims have been entered through the Fast Track system.

Claims submitted by Veterans who were previously denied service connection for any of the three presumptive conditions prior to October 13, 2009, must be processed in accordance with *Nehmer* guidelines. Such claims are being processed at one of 14 Resource Centers. All *Nehmer* claims under the jurisdiction of the St. Paul Regional Office are processed at the center in Phoenix, Arizona.

Claims handled by these special processing centers are receiving the highest level of attention. VA has established a goal of adjudicating the approximately 150,000 *Nehmer* claims by September 30, 2011. These claims are extremely complex, requiring a detailed review of potential entitlement from the earliest effective date allowable by law. VA is devoting extensive resources to processing these claims, assigning our most experienced employees to the adjudication of these very labor-intensive cases. Over 1,300 VA employees are now dedicated to processing *Nehmer* claims, and mandatory overtime has been initiated at these 14 Resource Centers. We are continuously reevaluating our processes to ensure that we are providing Veterans with decisions as quickly and accurately as possible. As of May 6, 2011, over 35,000 of these claims have been rated at these Resource Centers.

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We are also working to improve communications with our Veterans and their advocates through our social media outlets. We greatly appreciate the feedback from your constituents, and we are revising the information presented on the Fast Track Web site based on this feedback to clarify the types of claims that can be processed using this system. We recently clarified the site to better explain to Veterans they should not utilize the Fast Track program if they have previously filed a claim for any of the three new presumptive Agent Orange conditions, or if they wish to file a claim for additional service-connected conditions. Links to other information on Agent Orange claims processing and eligibility have also been added. In addition, we have provided our National Call Center agents with additional information regarding the mission and scope of the 14 Resource Centers to better assist them in providing complete and concise responses to Veterans and surviving spouses. We are dedicated to ensuring Veterans contacting VA for information and assistance are fully informed about their potential eligibility for benefits and understand how their claims will be processed.

Thank you for your continued support of our mission.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eric K. Shinseki". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "E" and "K".

Eric K. Shinseki