

VA Expands Protections for Veterans with Missing Paperwork

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Peake: Benefit of Doubt for Vets, Accountability for VA Staff

WASHINGTON – The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) today announced special procedures for processing claims from veterans, family members, and survivors whose applications for financial benefits from VA may have been mishandled by VA personnel.

These special procedures come after an audit by VA's Inspector General found documents waiting to be shredded at some of VA's regional offices that, if disposed of, could have affected the financial benefits awarded to veterans and survivors.

"I am deeply concerned that improper actions by a few VA employees could have caused any veterans to receive less than their full entitlement to benefits earned by their service to our nation," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Dr. James B. Peake.

"In rectifying this unacceptable lapse, VA will be guided by two principles – full accountability for VA staff and ensuring veterans receive the benefit of the doubt if receipt of a document by VA is in question," he added.

VA worked with the six largest veterans service organizations in developing these special new procedures. The procedures will assist veterans and survivors in establishing that an application or another document was previously submitted to VA, but was not properly acted upon by VA and was not retained in the veteran's records.

The special procedures cover missing documents submitted by a veteran or other applicant for VA benefits during the 18-month period between April 14, 2007 and October 14, 2008.

VA will process any missing applications or evidence resubmitted under these special procedures as if the document had been originally submitted on the date identified by the claimant.

Veterans and other applicants have one year, or until November 17, 2009, to file previously submitted documents under these special procedures.

Veterans not covered by these special rules who believe relevant material is missing from their files can submit additional documentation at any time. An award of benefits earlier than April 14, 2007, may be established if there is credible corroborating evidence supporting an earlier date of document submission.

When this problem of mishandled documents was uncovered on October 14, 2008, VA immediately ceased all shredding activities while it established tighter controls over all claims documents and conducted special training for all employees who process veterans' applications.

All regional office shredding equipment and operations are now under the strict control of the facility records management officer. Every employee has been given a separate receptacle for papers appropriate for shredding. These receptacles are subject to review by supervisors and

other officials.

Before any claims document can be shredded now, it must now be reviewed by two people and the facility records management officer.

VA's Inspector General is continuing to investigate a small number of cases where inappropriate shredding may be traceable to a specific employee. Legal and disciplinary action will be initiated to hold accountable any employee who has acted improperly.

Veterans and others who are concerned about missing documents and want more information on the special processing procedures may call 1-800-827-1000 for assistance or go to our website at http://www.vba.va.gov/VBA/specialprocedures_qa.asp.

They may also send an e-mail inquiry through IRIS@va.gov or visit their local VA regional office.

VA representatives will review VA's record systems to verify receipt of applications and supporting evidence and will assist anyone desiring to file a claim under the special processing procedures for missing documents.