

Veterans' Benefit Claims Records Wrongly Headed for VA Shredders

By Amanda Ruggeri

If military veterans applying for benefits either haven't gotten a reply from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs or received a different response than expected, it could mean that evidence for their claim file wound up in the shredder.

A nationwide review of the VA's 57 regional offices has found that 41 had records in their shredder bins that shouldn't have been there. In all, nearly 500 benefit claims records had been erroneously slated for destruction, including claims for compensation, notices of disagreement with a claim decision, and death certificates.

That number could drop, because the investigation is still tracking down some claims folders to see whether or not the records have already been incorporated into them. But officials also remain unsure how long the situation has been going on—and how many veterans may have been affected.

"The common problem in the VA system has been delays in getting the mail to the [veteran's] file," says Steve Smithson, deputy director of veterans affairs at the American Legion. "But shredding documents that may be relevant to the claim is new to us."

The issue first surfaced when audits by the VA's Office of Inspector General found records erroneously placed in shredder bins in the VA office in Detroit. In an ensuing nationwide review, the VA discovered that the Detroit office was only part of the problem. There are 474 documents that still cannot be identified as duplicated in veterans' claim files. Three offices have contributed more than half: St. Louis, with 94; Columbia, S.C., with 95; and Cleveland, with 53.

Particular individuals in the Columbia and St. Louis offices are being "looked at closely" in an ongoing investigation, VA Undersecretary for Benefits Patrick Dunne says. "They are not handling clients." Sources from veterans' organizations say they believe the two potential perpetrators to be under administrative leave. The Cleveland office also remains under investigation, and no particular worker has yet been identified as the source of the problem there.

VA's shredder bins typically are emptied once or twice a week, meaning that the 474 documents may represent only a few days' worth of errors. It will be nearly impossible to figure out how many documents had been incorrectly destroyed in the past—or if any have, Dunne says.

The approximately 50 different kinds of records found slated for destruction—including nine compensation claims, 18 notices of disagreement with a decision, and two death notices—could be key pieces of evidence for a veteran's application for benefits, says Jerry Manar, the national veterans service deputy director for the Veterans of Foreign Wars. If a key piece of evidence has been shredded, "it can result in the denial of a claim," Manar says. More than 800,000 claims of various kinds are currently pending in the VA's backlog.

The VA has taken swift action in an attempt to get the situation under control. All regional offices were immediately ordered to halt any shredding until changes are put in place. Training began in some of the regional offices this week to re-educate employees on the proper procedures for filing and shredding papers.

Meanwhile, a policy is being drafted to strengthen oversight in the regional offices. The revised policy likely will include a two-person review, in which an employee will initial and date a document slated for shredding, give it to his or her supervisor for review, and only then destroy it.

Some in the veterans community are urging more oversight. Rep. Bob Filner, head of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, recently announced that he will hold a hearing on the issue the week of November 17.

Veterans are urged to call their service officers or the VA itself if they have any reason to think their claims file is incomplete, particularly if they have not received a letter of acknowledgement for the submission of a claim after 30 days or if the VA's list of documents received seems incomplete.

"We can't tolerate even one veteran's piece of paper being missing," Dunne says. "We're taking action to make sure it doesn't happen again."