

VA responds to low certification test grades with more training

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Low pass rates on a certification test have prompted the Veterans Affairs Department to increase training for employees who oversee veterans' benefits, agency officials told lawmakers Wednesday.

Veterans service representatives are the first point of contact for returning soldiers looking for housing loans guarantees, compensation for medical disabilities and education benefits. In August 2003, the department offered the first certification test for the position but only a quarter of test-takers passed the 100-question multiple-choice open-book exam.

Starting Oct. 1, veterans service representatives will have 80 hours of required annual training, said Michael Wolcoff, associate deputy undersecretary for field operations at VA. Vice Adm. Daniel Cooper, the department's undersecretary for benefits, mandated the changes earlier this year.

"I think it was little bit of a shock to our organization frankly that someone did something more than just say 'Yeah, training is important,' " Wolcoff told members of the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs.

After dismal scores on the first certification test, the department also created a 20-hour prep course, which resulted in a 42 percent pass rate on the latest exam, in May. If employees pass the test, they become eligible for promotion from a GS-10 to a GS-11 position.

But labor union officials said the low pass rates are an indicator of a poor test which, even though it was an open book exam, was extremely detailed. Employees were given varying amounts of training and time to prepare, they said.

"I see VSRs feeling anxious about passing the skills certification test because they were not adequately informed about what to study in order to prepare for the test, or what proficiency level is needed to pass," said J. David Cox, national secretary-treasurer for the American Federation of Government Employees.

The position is an especially training-intensive one, because representatives can only learn the complex rules surrounding veterans benefits in-house -- they are not taught in schools or at other jobs. Every newly hired VSR completes a national training program followed by a 23-week curriculum at their regional office. VA officials estimate that representatives need two years of formal training.

From the veterans' perspective, increased training is welcome, but even more welcome would be a change in productivity quotas, said Steve Smithson, a deputy director at the American Legion.

"The culture of VA's claims adjudication has been, and continues to be, production driven," Smithson testified. That means veterans can be denied benefits without enough examination because employees need to complete cases swiftly.

Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., chairman of the subcommittee, said he plans continued oversight of the VSR position.

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