



March 16, 2006

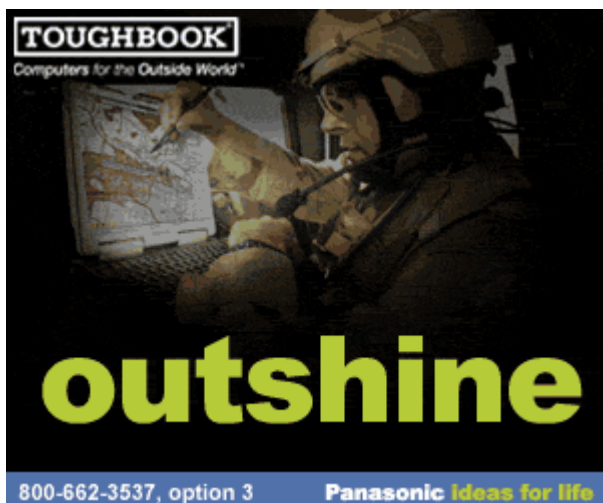
House to investigate VA's response to telephone questions

By [Rick Maze](#)

Times staff writer

A House subcommittee pledged Thursday to investigate charges by a federal employees' union that Department of Veterans Affairs workers often are unable to fully answer benefits questions from veterans and their families because of productivity pressure from their bosses.

The American Federation of Government Employees said in testimony provided to the House Veterans' Affairs subcommittee on disability assistance that VA workers "face many challenges in their jobs, including a growing number of complex claims, staff attrition and intense productivity pressures, including the 'three-minute rule.' "



The rule, the union said, requires a caller to spend no more than three minutes on hold waiting for a VA employee to answer, and for the discussion itself to last no longer than an additional three minutes.

"Although phone inquiries are typically not very case-specific, the responses often last more than a few minutes, especially if corrective action is needed or specialized information needs to be retrieved," the testimony says,

The AFGE statement was introduced at a hearing to look into complaints that many callers get wrong

information when they ask the VA for help.

Rep. Shelly Berkley of Nevada, the subcommittee's ranking Democrat, said she has been told the VA has assigned people to answer phones "as punishment for poor performance."

Berkley and Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., the subcommittee chairman, said the VA must do better.

Miller said a VA "mystery caller" program, in which investigators pretending to be veterans called to ask questions, found up to 50 percent of the information provided was wrong and that callers often "were treated rudely."

Jack McCoy, the VA's associate deputy undersecretary for policy and program management, said mistakes have been made, but denied there is a three-minute rule.

"I absolutely do not believe that is true," he said.

He said there are daily performance standards requiring 64 calls to be answered, but said there is no specific time limit on any one call.

He also defended VA employees answering the calls. "There are an awful lot of good employees sometimes trying to answer complex questions," McCoy said.

Miller and Berkley said they would continue to investigate the union's complaint.

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