

VA claims expected to take longer in 2011

By Rick Maze - Staff writer

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The 2011 Veterans Affairs Department budget unveiled Monday by the White House includes what VA officials called an "unprecedented" 27 percent funding increase for the Veterans Benefits Administration, some of which will be used to hire 4,000 permanent employees to process benefits claims.

The increase does not mean disability, pension and survivors claims will be processed faster, however.

In an admission that comes as no surprise to few who have been watching VA struggle with a backlog of benefits claims, Michael Walcoff, VA's acting undersecretary for benefits, said veterans should be prepared for the average claims processing time to be longer in fiscal 2011 than it is today.

The reason? Even though more workers are being hired, VA officials expect a big jump in the number of Vietnam-era veterans filing Agent Orange-related claims due to newly expanded eligibility.

It takes an average of 158 days to process a benefit claim today, Walcoff said. He expects that will rise to 190 days in 2011, at least for the first few months of the year, as new employees are hired and trained and a flood of complicated claims requesting retroactive benefits are received from Vietnam veterans.

"Dealing with the claims backlog is complicated," Walcoff said. "There is more involved than just the number of people we have handling claims."

VA officials expect to receive 1.3 million claims in 2011, part of a two-year, 30 percent jump that is greatly hampering VA's efforts to achieve its goal of bringing the average claims processing time down to 125 days.

In a statement, VA Secretary Eric Shinseki said there are long-term plans to harness technology to speed claims, such as establishing a paperless processing system and changing procedures to reduce steps as part of promised transformation. But in the short term, there is no quick solution.

In addition to the 27 percent increase in benefits funding, the proposed 2011 VA budget includes an 8.5 percent increase in medical funding.

At a Monday press conference, VA Deputy Secretary W. Scott Gould called the 2011 budget a "watershed moment" for veterans, citing the big funding increases and the fact that the budget includes, for the first time, advance funding for health care for the following fiscal year.

The budget calls for 5,715 additional permanent employees, a 2 percent increase over the current workforce. This includes the 4,000 claims processors, about 1,300 medical care workers and a smattering of additional workers in other departments.

The 4,000 claims processors are not necessarily new employees; about 1,800 are currently temporary employees whose positions would be made permanent, said W. Todd Grams, acting VA assistant secretary for management.

VA expects big increases in patient loads in 2011 and 2012 as the number of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans seeking treatment rises.

About 382,500 recent combat veterans use VA today. A 15 percent increase is projected for 2011 and an additional 13 percent increase is expected in 2012, Grams said.