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## Backlog of VA claims and appeals is nearing 1 million

### *Over 80,000 cases are added monthly*

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The U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs is closing in on a milestone, and it's not a happy one.

It's approaching the 1 million mark in the number of outstanding claims by veterans.

The VA's Web site shows more than 722,000 current claims, along with more than 172,000 appeals, for a total of about 900,000. That is up from about 800,000 total claims in January, according to the site.

"They are spending too much time and effort in proving what they don't need to fix rather than putting the time and energy into fixing what they've broken," said Christopher Kreiger, a disabled Town of Tonawanda veteran and president of WNY Heroes, an organization that helps veterans.

Can the VA actually handle a million cases?

"One major challenge in improving service delivery of compensation and pension benefits is the steady and sizable increase in workload," VA Deputy Undersecretary Michael Walcoff testified Thursday at a meeting of the House Subcommittee on Disability Assistance. "This year we are averaging over 80,000 new claims added to the inventory each month."

Adding to the backlog are factors ranging from the complexity of processing mental health-related claims of Iraq War veterans, to a change that made it easier for Vietnam War veterans exposed to the herbicide Agent Orange to qualify for disability payments. The VA says it's receiving about 13 percent more claims today than it did a year ago.

About 13,000 claims are pending in New York State. According to Patrick Welch, director of Veterans Services for

Erie County, the VA needs to hire more claims processors and update how the system operates.

Currently, the agency is scrambling to hire and train new claims processors, which can take two years. Since early 2007, the VA has hired 4,200 claims processors and has seen improvements in the number of claims it's processing.

Even though the VA says the average wait for a claim is 120.9 days, Welch, a Vietnam veteran, says he works with veterans who are "waiting anywhere from six to 14 months."

It's a disaster for them financially, he added.

"Part of the issue that's happening with traumatic brain-injured veterans is they are unable to work and what happens is some lose their homes," Welch said.

One of the vets who lost his home was Kreiger, he noted.

Kreiger, an Iraq veteran who eventually was classified 100 percent disabled, said he has been approached by dozens of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans denied benefits for post traumatic stress claims.

"Easily 50 veterans have come to me because the VA proved their PTSD was something they had before going to war, which makes them now ineligible for the benefit. The VA doesn't even call it PTSD anymore. They refer to it as a personality disorder," he said in citing bureaucratic struggles faced by returning veterans.

James D. McDonough, state director of veterans affairs, also expressed dismay over the increasing number of claims awaiting action.

"No one should be happy that the number of claims has grown to nearly a million. I'm not," McDonough said.

He offered some advice. First-time claims, he said, need to be prepared properly so that veterans can avoid the lengthy appeals process.

"We operate a statewide network of benefits counselors, and we stress quality claim work the first time. If you do that, you're actually supporting the effort to reduce the amount of claims awaiting processing and the amount of error," he said. "It's our job to bear the burden for the veteran. We advocate their concerns to the VA and get it done."

He said veterans who need help can contact his office by going to the department's Web site, [www.veterans.ny.gov](http://www.veterans.ny.gov), or calling (888) 838-7697.

[The Associated Press contributed to this article. \[lmichel@buffnews.com\]\(mailto:lmichel@buffnews.com\)](#)

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