

# VFW NATIONAL VETERANS SERVICE



HONORING THE DEAD BY HELPING THE LIVING ★ MAY 2010



Photo: DoD

## VFW Sets Sights on Improved VA Claims Process

The Veterans of Foreign Wars has named improving the VA claims system a top priority for 2010.

Following a federal investigation of the VA in March 2009, the VA’s Inspector General released a report stating that one-fourth of files have errors, or, in other words, 200,000 files may be incorrect.

Decisions on claims and appeals can take months, even years.

“We envision a day when a veteran gets the claim done correctly the first time within a reasonable timeframe,” said Eric Hilleman, Director, VFW Legislative Service. “We are working with the VA and Congress to find constructive ways to address the

shortcomings of the system.

The VFW believes that automation of processes, accountability for decision-making and consistent training of VA staff are the keys to improving the quality and timeliness of claims.

“The VFW is the VA’s strongest ally in Congress and sometimes its loudest critic, but we recognize that only by working together will the claims problem be solved,” said Thomas J. Tradewell, Sr., VFW National Commander.

Visit [www.vfw.org](http://www.vfw.org) for the latest on the issues facing veterans and what VFW is doing to help. ★

## VFW is Fighting for VETERANS!

VFW National Veterans Service works to ensure veterans receive every entitlement available to them from their government. Our nationwide network of service officers is established to help veterans and their families file claims with the VA. This service is available at no charge—and made possible through donations. Visit [www.vfw.org/vetservice](http://www.vfw.org/vetservice) to learn more.



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**Thank You for Your Support**  
 We realize that much of our work would not be possible without your generous and dedicated support, and we would like to let you know how much we recognize and appreciate your continuing contributions.

# North Carolina Service Officer Goes Above and Beyond

“So many veterans don’t know their rights,” said North Carolina VFW Service Officer Donald W. Priem, Jr. “They need to talk to someone that can guide them through the benefits available to them.”

When combat veteran Annie Conrad visited Priem’s office in Winston-Salem, N.C., she was in desperate need of some guidance. Priem, having retired from a 24-year career in the Air Force, understood her frustration.

Conrad was injured in a service-connected automobile accident. This accident left her with a cervical spine injury and intense neck and back pain.

“After meeting with Annie, it didn’t take me long to figure out what she was missing,” said Priem. “She needed a notarized statement from someone who witnessed the accident and a medical opinion that backed up her claim.”

In a letter featured in *The VFW Leader*, Conrad shared her gratitude for Priem’s assistance.

“He gave me his utmost attention and always returned my phone calls within the same business day, no matter how busy he was. He worked

persistently and relentlessly for me. He worked on my claim while I was confined to my couch.”

Once Priem pointed Conrad in the right direction, they secured the needed documentation, and Conrad was awarded full benefits.

“It always feels good when I win a case,” said Priem. “Annie had gone so long without success. It was nice to give her some different news.”

After 25 years as a service officer, 21 of which were spent as a county service officer in Florida, Priem stays two steps ahead of the VA. When Priem isn’t taking appointments with veterans or accepting walk-ins, he’s visiting VA rating boards to assure that all claims are reviewed.

“As long as I’m helping a veteran, my goal is fulfilled,” said Priem. “That’s the name of the game.”

Whatever the name of the game, Priem reigns victorious. Last year, Priem helped veterans receive over



Donald W. Priem, Jr.

\$18.5 million in benefits. This translates into over 6,000 interviews and 6,500 processed claims.

To all the veterans out there who need guidance, Priem calls on you.

“Go to someone who is knowledgeable,” said Priem. “Come to me.” ★

## We Asked... You Answered

### Do you think recent VA funding increases have improved the quality of health care you, or your fellow veterans, receive?

We received a hearty response to the last issue’s question.

Approximately 58% of respondents felt that, yes, funding increases had indeed improved the quality of health care. Another 28% didn’t believe care had improved,

**58% of veterans said yes.**

and the remaining 14% were undecided.

“The VA help in Long Beach is top drawer!” indicated one veteran.

“The VA is my caregiver in its entirety. Excellent,” echoed another respondent.

“I receive excellent care. Hats off to the entire staff,” concluded another respondent.

Still, many veterans expressed frustrations with the VA

medical system, especially with wait times.

“You still have to wait a month to see a doctor,” said one veteran.

“Access to my VA doctor is limited. If I’m sick, I go to the Health Department,” explained another veteran.

“The veteran is forgotten after he served his time,” expressed another respondent.

“It’s taking too long for veterans to get help fast enough,” indicated another respondent.

Watch this newsletter for future questions. Thank you for caring about the issues that matter to veterans. ★



# Service Officer Takes Matters Into His Own Hands

When you know you're right ... when you have the proof to back it up, sometimes you just have to roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty.

South Carolina VFW State Service Officer Jimmy Lee Wallace had no problem working a little harder to get justice for Ryan (not his real name).

"Here you have a nice, engaging young man with a wife and three kids," began Wallace. "He had to put food on the table."

Putting food on the table is hard to do when you can't work. After nearly 25 years in the Army, Ryan was certainly worse for the wear. He had 22 service-connected disabilities that prevented him from holding a job after he left the military. Ryan served in the Persian Gulf, Iraq and Afghanistan.

"I've never seen anything like it," said Wallace. "On their own, none of his conditions would've been completely debilitating, but together they were pretty taxing for the poor guy."

"He had depression, tinnitus, hypertension and bronchial asthma, just to name a few. I was always impressed with how positive and upbeat he was despite the all the physical and mental stress he was under," said Wallace, who took over the South Carolina Office in September 2009.

Ryan initially filed his claim in 2004 after separating from the Army.

"He was initially with another service organization, but didn't feel like

enough attention was being paid to his case," explained Wallace.

In 2006, with our help, he received a 60% rating, but that still didn't seem correct. Wallace dug in.

"Each time it came back, I just thought, 'No, this guy deserves a 100% rating.'"

Finally, Wallace decided to walk the claim upstairs and go over it with the Ratings Board Coach himself.

"We're not shy about that type of thing," explained Wallace. "The VA recognized what we had here. After I walked up there and went over it personally with the Board, Ryan received his 100% rating."

Ryan got \$10,395 in retroactive benefits and now receives approximately \$3,000 a month as part of his award.

"Ryan's biggest concern all along was for his family," Wallace said. "I was so glad we were able to get this done for them." ★



Jimmy Lee Wallace, South Carolina State Service Officer



*"We understand the frustration that veterans and their families experience from delayed, rejected or improperly adjudicated claims, but we also know there are no quick fixes. That's why the VFW will continue to work with VA leadership and Congress to find a permanent solution, because we know the backlog will only continue to rise as the veterans' population ages, as more become eligible from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and elsewhere, as presumptive illnesses and programs are expanded and as more veterans learn about the government programs and benefits available to them."*

Thomas J. Tradewell, Sr.,  
VFW National Commander



*"Our 2010 budget represents the President's vision for how VA will transform into a 21st century organization that is veteran-centric, results-driven and forward-looking. This transformation is demanded by new times, new technologies, new demographic realities and new commitments to today's veterans."*

VA Secretary  
Eric K. Shinseki



*"Only our individual faith in freedom can keep us free."*

Dwight D. Eisenhower



## VFW Helps Marines File VA Claims



If you know of a Marine who needs help filing a VA claim or dealing with a pending claim, tell them about [1Marine@vfw.org](mailto:1Marine@vfw.org). Marines can e-mail this address to get connected to a VFW service officer in their area. If the program to reach out to Marines picks up steam, VFW plans to expand it to other military branches. Pass it on and help a veteran today! ★

**E-mail [1Marine@vfw.org](mailto:1Marine@vfw.org)**

Connecting. In today's world, you wouldn't think it would be a challenge. But it's disturbing that "connecting" to the help they need is often so difficult for America's veterans.

This is vital considering recent victories concerning service-connected illnesses with the VA and the excellent outreach services provided by the VFW and other concerned veterans' groups.

If our veterans don't know help is available they can't take advantage of it. That's why I hope you'll help VFW spread the word about a few programs that will help our heroes.

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Nearly every city has health fairs throughout the year. VFW consistently has a presence at events like these. Veterans can ask questions and get information about care in their area.

Recently, the VFW initiated a program called 1Marine. Any

Marine can use this one convenient e-mail address, [1Marine@vfw.org](mailto:1Marine@vfw.org), to get help with a VA claim. Any former Marine who has a claim pending with the VA, or wants to file a new claim, will be referred to a VFW service officer near them.

One of the most exciting new services for veterans is the VA's mobile counseling units. There are 49 mobile coaches traveling to rural and underserved areas across the country. The coaches are equipped with counseling rooms, trained outreach specialists and equipment that allows veterans to file for VA claims on the spot. Comrade, it's up to us to help veterans make the connection! Tear articles about new programs and services out of the VFW magazine and pass them on to veterans you know. Forward helpful e-mails. Every bit helps.

With a little extra effort, we can ensure America's veterans receive the respect and care they deserve.

I offer my word that our resolve will not falter, that we will remain steadfast in this noble mission.



William Bradshaw, Director,  
National Veterans Service

# Anatomy of a VA Appeals Consultant

*Dawn Jirak puts her medical background to use for veterans.*

Sutures. Bandages. Blood. After more than 20 years of firsthand experience with patient care, Dawn Jirak, E7 Master Sgt. in the United States Air Force, was ready for the next stage of her career.

A chance encounter with a claims specialist opened a new door for her.

"I was a medical technician in the Air Force. When I retired and was filing my VA paperwork, the woman who helped me told me about what she did," explained Jirak. "She said a job was opening up.

"I'm familiar with files, charts and medical terms and thought it sounded like a good fit," she continued. "I thought I could put my know-how to work for veterans."

Jirak went on to become the second person graduated from the Fast Track National Veterans Service program and loves her new job.

"I haven't started an IV in over a year!" she said.

Instead, she's been going through VA claims appeals with a fine-toothed comb. Jirak likens her job to "investigative work" and uses her medical background to get justice for veterans contesting their claims.

"I remember a case where a Vietnam veteran received a compensation rating based only on the scars he had as a result of an explosion," Jirak shared. "There was nothing about the muscle damage or shrapnel left in his body.

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*Knowing that she's helping veterans "get what they deserve" keeps Jirak inspired.*

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Dawn Jirak is proud to help veterans of all generations get the benefits they rightly deserve.

"We were able to dramatically increase his rating and that felt good. He received a substantial amount of money in retroactive benefits."

Knowing that she's helping veterans "get what they deserve" keeps Jirak inspired.

"Sometimes if the veterans have passed away, we're able to help their widows," she continued. "And these 18-19 year old guys coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan with PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI)—we're taking care of them."

Jirak often marvels at the number of veterans who would've never received justice if their claims stopped at the regional level. She urges all veterans to take advantage of the resources available to them.

"My good friend is retiring soon," she explained. "I talk to him every day, but I told him he needs to contact the VFW if he has questions.

"There are so many publications and websites that can help veterans find jobs, medical care and rehabilitation programs. They just need to take the first step." ★