

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

COMMITTEES:

FINANCE

BANKING, HOUSING, AND  
URBAN AFFAIRS

COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND  
TRANSPORTATION

VETERANS' AFFAIRS

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

September 26, 2016

The Honorable Thomas J. Murphy  
Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Benefits  
U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue Northwest  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Deputy Under Secretary Murphy,

As a member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, I write to you today to follow up on the progress the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has made in reducing the wait times for veterans, which the states of Nevada and Pennsylvania were once the worst in the nation, as well as what more can be done to eliminate the remaining backlog. As a Co-Chair of the VA Backlog Working Group, I have been committed to addressing the veterans' disability claims backlog to ensure the process is timely and works in favor of Nevada and our nation's veterans.

For several years, I have worked to ensure the VA and veterans have the tools needed so veterans' disability claims can receive a decision within the VA's 125 day target. In fact, after serious leadership problems at the Regional VA Regional Office (VARO) resulted in poor service to veterans, I called for the resignation of the director. Since the VARO came under new leadership, I have seen a commitment on the local level to ensuring Nevada's veterans receive timely answers and quality service from the VARO in my state. However, as you well know, the VA committed that it would eliminate the veterans' disability claims backlog by the end of 2015. It is now September 2016, and the backlog has remained stagnant nationwide at 20%, or around 77,000-80,000 backlogged claims, for the past year. Furthermore, the VA has instituted a new system known as the National Work Queue, but has done little to no outreach to Congress to explain how this will impact service on the local level, especially when claims may be outsourced to VAROs in another state.

Given the continual backlog, as well as changes to the disability claims process that impact my home state veterans and those across the nation, I respectfully request a meeting with you to discuss the VA's plan for eliminating the remainder of the backlog and to receive more information about the National Work Queue. Additionally, I also request answers to the following questions prior to this meeting.

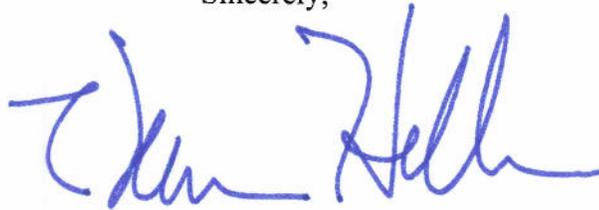
- Are there plans to maintain the current number of employees working at the VARO in Nevada? If not, please specify the change in the number of employees, which part of the

state those changes will be made, and how the VA plans to mitigate any potential reduction in employees.

- Has the VA developed a new plan to address the existing backlog that has continued at 20% for a year?
- Under the National Work Queue, how will Members of Congress know in which VARO their constituent's claims are being processed? Will caseworkers be provided liaison contacts in every VARO given their local VARO may not be working on claims that originated in the state?
- How are Members of Congress, under this new system, able to measure the progress and success of their individual VAROs and the impact on their constituents if claims are sent out of state?

Thank you for your attention to this matter, and I look forward to your response to my request, as well as the above questions by October 6, 2016.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Dean Heller". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "D" and "H".

DEAN HELLER  
U.S. Senator