



VA REGIONAL OFFICE, WINSTON-SALEM, N.C.

Date: Nov. 5-6, 2019

Attendees: Claims Services Coordinator Melinda Staton

Purpose: To Conduct a R.O.A.R. Visit and Provide Feedback to VA Regional Office Executive and Senior Leadership

Discussion

The American Legion visited the Winston-Salem, N.C., Veterans Affairs Regional Office (VARO) from Nov. 5-6, 2019. This year's focus for the Regional Office Action Review (ROAR) continues to be the impact of the National Work Queue (NWQ) and the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) work-credit system on the adjudication of veterans' claims.

The purpose of this visit was to review the service-connected disability compensation claims-processing function. Before the implementation of NWQ, the Winston-Salem VARO was primarily responsible for service-connected disability compensation claims for veterans residing in North Carolina. The point of contact for this visit was Martiez Taylor, Change Management Agent for the Winston-Salem Regional Office. Taylor provided a tour of the facility which was followed by employee interviews.

Productivity

The inventory at the time of the site visit included: 1,412 new entitlement, 688 award adjustments, 2,816 appeals at RO, and 1,782 board remands. The number of cases completed in FY19 were: 98,151 rating claims, 87,460 non-rating claims, 1,237 appeals, and 1,801 board remands. The FY19 average days pending for cases were 2.6 days for rating claims and 2.4 days for non-rating. Notices of Disagreement (NOD), Statements of the Case (SOC), and Form 9 (Appeal Requests) were 256 days, 47 days, and 251 days respectfully.

Top 3 Rating Errors:

1. Missed issues
2. Incorrect effective date
3. Inadequate exams/opinions

Top 3 Authorization Errors:

1. Dependency (effective dates)
2. Administrative notification/decision
3. System compliance

To address and mitigate the errors, the Winston-Salem RO tailored its training plan to focus more on current needs and STAR specific error trends. The RO leadership team discusses STAR quality errors during monthly calls, through moni-

toring quality (quality observer), and weekly notices (weekly splash). The quality team provides one-on-one mentoring for all STAR errors and creates mini training plans for employees who receive more than one STAR error. The RO leadership team also conducted RAMP, AMA and deferral training and implemented an authorization quality wellness plan to provide STAR specific error training to the non-rating team and all VSRs.

The National Work Queue changed the way that regional offices receive and process claims. Under NWQ, rating decision output increased from an average of 445 per day (60 per production team) to 500 per day (71 per production team). Among the strategies the Winston-Salem team used to streamline processes and increase output were: a daily pull of claims that were made ready for decision, auto-assigning claims to employees, maximizing mentorship, centralizing second-signature reviews, and increased collaboration with local VSO organizations to expedite ratings reviews. The American Legion Service Officers at the Winston-Salem RO received accolades for their timely review of cases within 48 hours.

Employee Feedback

The American Legion interviewed 9 Veterans Service Center employees during the ROAR visit. Topics included: NWQ, leadership access, timeliness and accuracy of information, production standards and work-credit system, employee training and employee/leadership relations.

The employees expressed that their job satisfaction primarily resides in the service they provide veterans, especially when they are able to grant benefits. They are also thankful for a secure job, their team members, and every opportunity to help veterans understand their benefits and their rating decisions. However, their assessment is that the quality of work across regional offices needs improvement. A common employee opinion is that regional offices continue to employ their own processes, despite VBA's goal to standardize processes under NWQ.

When asked about the Work Credit System, employees opined that the work-credit system is not fair or balanced. The common response is that credit often does not accurately reflect the task. Each task varies in complexity and may take minutes, hours or days. The employees report that they frequently encounter complex cases that they are not able



to rate after thorough review. This often results in lost time and no points, which has a drastic negative effect on credited productivity. Employees also report that they often do not receive excluded time in these situations. Those who felt the system was fair were not in VSR positions and felt that once people learn the job, they will end up doing what's best for the veterans. A common response from leadership teams across VBA is that the combination of simple and complex tasks creates a balance at the end of the day.

Training is an important element of successful operations at the RO. The Winston-Salem employees expressed that training significantly improved after a new training manager joined the team. They gave good reviews of the lunch and learn sessions where they cover a variety of topics. The training team also use short huddle meetings to provide training and reinforce topics previously covered. The employees believe the training will continue to improve because they have an experienced training manager who continuously solicits employee feedback about their current training needs.

Winston-Salem employees said they are comfortable discussing concerns or issues with leadership. They believe that

leadership provides timely, accurate information. One exception was during the roll-out of the Appeals Modernization Act. The employees expressed that VBA did not afford the ROs and employees enough time to learn the changes and implement the new programs without error.

The American Legion appreciates the accommodations provided by the Winston-Salem Regional Office and its leadership team. On behalf of The American Legion, I thank you and your staff for your hospitality and support during our ROAR visit.

Respectfully Submitted by,

Melinda Staton
Claims Services Coordinator
The American Legion