


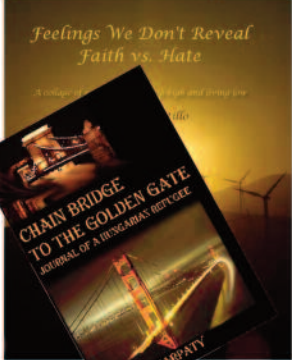
# VA working on cutting the claims backlog

The Veterans Affairs Department's chief technology officer said March 18 at a roundtable discussion about ways to cut the growing backlog of claims and improve accuracy that bailing wire and bandages can't save the veterans disability claims process. In my judgment, it cannot be fixed," said Peter Levin. "We need to build a new system, and that is exactly what we are going to do." Levin's comments came at a meeting organized by the House Veterans' Affairs Committee to toss around ideas for repairing a system that has a backlog of about 1.1 million claims awaiting decisions and an error rate of 17% to 25%, depending on who is counting. Rep. Bob Filner (D-VA), the committee chairman, described the system as an "insult to veterans" who wait an average of six months for an initial decision on benefits and can wait for years if the decision is appealed. "It looks like we are going backwards rather than forward," Filner said. "No matter how much we raise the budget, no matter how many people we hire, the backlog seems to get bigger. People die before their claim is adjudicated. They lose their home. They lose their car."

Overhauling the disability claims process is the top priority of veterans groups and the Obama administration, but there is

no agreement on exactly what to do. The short-term solution proposed by the administration is what VA Secretary Eric Shinseki has called the "brute force" option: hiring more people to process claims. But because fully training new workers takes two years or longer, and the total number of claims received by VA is increasing, hiring more people is not expected to improve the process for three to five years, said Dan Bertoni, director of disability issues for the Government Accountability Office. VA is working on a number of pilot projects that might lead to a new way to process claims, by reducing steps and moving to a fully electronic record system. But the system remains so complex that an easy fix is elusive — which is why Levin talked about starting over. Veteran groups; however, are not ready to blow up the system and start over. In a joint letter dated 17 MAR to veterans' committee members, major veterans groups say they are unaware of any "magic bullet" solution or alternative system to the current problems, but they support changes to the current system. They are pushing the idea of providing quick disability benefits — in 60 days or less — to veterans with disabilities that can be "easily or quickly resolved," which would include those scientifically linked to military service, orthopedic conditions and hearing loss.

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