

## United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 16, 2011

COMMITTEES:  
HOMELAND SECURITY  
AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

ARMED SERVICES

VETERANS' AFFAIRS

SMALL BUSINESS

The Honorable Eric Shinseki  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue Northwest  
Washington, DC 20420-0002

Dear Secretary Shinseki,

As you know, I recently led a Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs field hearing in Quincy, Massachusetts to address the growing claims backlog. At the hearing, I heard testimony from veterans, their advocates, and VA personnel about the claims process as well as their suggestions to improve the claims processing system. While there is consensus that progress has been made under your leadership, it is also clear that further improvement is necessary.

While we heard about several steps you have taken to make the process better, such as easier to use application forms and improvements in the handling of claims related to post-traumatic stress, veterans often feel overwhelmed by the sheer amount of paperwork and complex terms used in letters they receive from VA. Furthermore, many veterans are unacquainted with the process of filing a claim or where to turn for professional assistance, leaving veterans feeling isolated and overmatched during the process. In addition, while VA's efforts to modernize through initiatives like eBenefits and paperless claims will ease the backlog down the road, the implementation of these programs is a slow process. We need to do more in the meantime to expedite the claims process and reduce errors. The Fully Developed Claims program has the potential to help reduce the backlog, but many veterans stated that Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) have been unwilling to embrace this new system after spending years trying to master the current claims process.

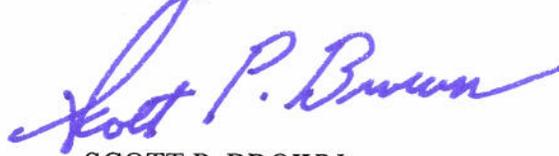
Please respond with information pertaining to the following topics, some of which were discussed at the field hearing, so that I am aware of VA's efforts to further improve the claims process with the ultimate goal of eliminating the backlog:

- Work to better integrate Department of Defense and VA, so that veterans are fully educated before they separate from service. Many veterans leave their service without adequate knowledge of the benefits to which they are entitled or the organizations that can assist in the claims process. While the Integrated Disability Evaluation System is designed to streamline benefits, the average claim currently takes 394 days to resolve.
- Simplify the language of letters sent to veterans regarding their claims. If there are statutory requirements that prohibit simplification, the Committee stands ready to assist.
- Continue to work towards a paperless system and encourage veterans and VSOs to fully utilize eBenefits and other new initiatives.

- Increase awareness of the Fully Developed Claims program and encourage veterans and VSOs to utilize the program when appropriate. Educate veterans and their advocates of the program to streamline the claims process.

I look forward to working together with you and your staff to address these critical issues. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Bo Prosch in my Washington office at (202) 224-4543.

Sincerely,



SCOTT P. BROWN  
United States Senator  
Member, Committee on Veterans Affairs