

VA Office of Inspector General

OFFICE OF AUDITS AND EVALUATIONS



Veterans Benefits Administration

*Inspection of
VA Regional Office
Hartford, Connecticut*

December 15, 2015
15-04986-42

ACRONYMS

OIG	Office of Inspector General
RVSR	Rating Veterans Service Representative
SMC	Special Monthly Compensation
TBI	Traumatic Brain Injury
VA	Department of Veterans Affairs
VARO	Veterans Affairs Regional Office
VBA	Veterans Benefits Administration
VSC	Veterans Service Center

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Report Highlights: Inspection of VA Regional Office Hartford, CT

Why We Did This Review

The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) has 56 VA Regional Offices (VAROs) and a Veterans Service Center in Wyoming, that process disability claims and provides services to veterans. In September 2015, we evaluated the Hartford VARO to see how well it accomplishes this mission. We sampled claims we considered at increased risk of processing errors, thus these results do not represent the overall accuracy of disability claims processing at this VARO.

What We Found

The Hartford VARO did not accurately process one of the three types of disability claims we reviewed. Overall, VARO staff did not accurately process 5 of the 33 disability claims (15 percent) reviewed. As a result, 58 improper payments were made to 5 veterans totaling \$49,237. During this inspection, VARO staff incorrectly processed 4 of the 25 temporary 100 percent disability evaluations. These results showed improvement from our previous inspection in 2011, where 18 of 30 cases sampled contained processing inaccuracies. Results from our current inspection also showed claims processing staff accurately processed all 5 traumatic brain injury claims—an improvement from our 2011 inspection, where 7 of the 10 cases sampled contained errors. One of the three Special Monthly Compensation and ancillary benefits claims completed by VARO staff between July 2014 and June 2015 contained an error. However, a systemic trend was not found.

VARO staff established the correct dates of claim for 30 cases reviewed in the electronic record. However, 14 of the 30 benefits reduction cases we reviewed had processing delays. Generally, the errors related to prioritization of workload.

What We Recommended

We recommended the Hartford VARO Director ensure staff conduct a review of the three temporary 100 percent disability evaluations remaining from our inspection universe. We also recommended the VARO Director ensure benefits reductions cases are prioritized to minimize improper payments.

Agency Comments

The Director of the Hartford VARO concurred with all recommendations. Management's planned actions are responsive and we will follow up as required.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Brent A. Arronte".

BRENT A. ARRONTE
Assistant Inspector General
for Audits and Evaluations

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INTRODUCTION

Objective

The Benefits Inspection Program is part of the Office of Inspector General's (OIG) efforts to ensure our nation's veterans receive timely and accurate benefits and services. The Benefits Inspection Divisions contribute to improved management of benefits processing activities and veterans' services by conducting onsite inspections at VA Regional Offices (VAROs). These independent inspections provide recurring oversight focused on disability compensation claims processing and the performance of Veterans Service Center (VSC) operations. The objectives of the inspections are to:

- Evaluate how well VAROs are accomplishing their mission of providing veterans with access to high-quality benefits and services.
- Determine whether management controls ensure compliance with VA regulations and policies; assist management in achieving program goals; and minimize the risk of fraud, waste, and other abuses.
- Identify and report systemic trends in VARO operations.

Where we identify potential inaccuracies, we provide this information to help the VARO understand the procedural improvements it can make to ensure enhanced stewardship of financial benefits. We do not provide this information to require the VARO to adjust specific veterans' benefits. Processing any adjustments per this review is clearly a Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) program management decision.

In addition to this oversight, inspections may examine issues or allegations referred by VA employees, members of Congress, or other stakeholders.

Other Information

- Appendix A includes details on the Hartford VARO and the scope of our inspection.
- Appendix B outlines criteria we used to evaluate each operational activity and a summary of our inspection results.
- Appendix C provides the Hartford VARO Director's comments on a draft of this report.

RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I. Disability Claims Processing

Claims Processing Accuracy

The OIG Benefits Inspection team focused on evaluating the accuracy in processing the following three types of disability claims and determined their effect on veterans' benefits:

- Temporary 100 percent disability evaluations,
- Traumatic brain injury (TBI) claims, and
- Special monthly compensation (SMC) and ancillary benefits.

We sampled claims related only to specific conditions that we considered at higher risk of processing errors. As a result, the errors identified do not represent the universe of disability claims or the overall accuracy rate at this VARO.

Finding 1 Hartford VARO Needs To Improve the Processing of One Type of Disability Claim

Hartford VARO staff did not accurately process one of the three types of high-risk disability claims we reviewed. Overall, VARO staff incorrectly processed 5 of the total 33 disability claims (15 percent) we sampled, resulting in 58 improper monthly payments to 5 veterans totaling approximately \$49,237.* Table 1 reflects processing errors identified during our review.

Table 1. Hartford VARO Disability Claims Processing Accuracy for Three High-Risk Claims Processing Areas

Type of Claim	Claims Reviewed	Claims Inaccurately Processed: Affecting Veterans' Benefits	Claims Inaccurately Processed: Potential To Affect Veterans' Benefits	Claims Inaccurately Processed: Total
Temporary 100 Percent Disability Evaluations	25	4	0	4
TBI Claims	5	0	0	0
SMC and Ancillary Benefits	3	1	0	1
Total	33	5	0	5

Source: VA OIG analysis of VBA's temporary 100 percent disability evaluations paid at least 18 months; TBI disability claims completed from January through June 2015; and SMC and ancillary benefits claims completed from July 2014 through June 2015.

* All calculations in this report have been rounded when applicable.

**Temporary
100 Percent
Disability
Evaluations**

VARO staff incorrectly processed 4 of 25 temporary 100 percent disability evaluations we reviewed. VBA policy requires a temporary 100 percent disability evaluation for a veteran's service-connected disability following a surgery or when specific treatment is needed. At the end of a mandated period of convalescence or treatment, VARO staff must request a follow-up medical examination to help determine whether to continue the veteran's 100 percent disability evaluation.

When the VARO obtains evidence that a lower disability evaluation would result in a reduction or discontinuance of current compensation payments, VSC staff must inform the beneficiary of the proposed reduction in benefits. In order to provide beneficiaries due process, VBA allows 60 days for the veteran to submit additional evidence to show that compensation payments should continue at their present level. On the 65th day following due process notification, action is required to reduce the evaluation and thereby minimize overpayments.

Without effective management of these temporary 100 percent disability ratings, VBA is at an increased risk of paying inaccurate financial benefits. Available medical evidence showed all 4 processing errors we identified affected veterans' benefits and resulted in 16 improper monthly payments to 4 veterans. Improper payments totaled approximately \$27,649 and occurred from January to August 2015. VARO management agreed with our assessments in all four cases. Details on the four errors affecting benefits follow.

- Three errors occurred when VARO staff did not timely reduce benefits after receiving medical evidence that showed the veterans' conditions no longer supported the temporary 100 percent disability evaluations. As a result, the following improper payments were made:
 - One veteran was overpaid approximately \$20,362 over a period of 7 months.
 - Another veteran was overpaid approximately \$5,206 over a period of 3 months.
 - Lastly, a veteran was overpaid approximately \$1,734 over a period of 5 months.
- In the final case, a Rating Veterans Service Representative (RVSR) did not establish entitlement to a special monthly compensation benefit based on the evaluation of multiple disabilities, as required. As a result, the veteran was underpaid approximately \$347 over a period of 1 month.

The majority of the processing inaccuracies occurred when VARO staff delayed finalizing benefits reductions after receiving evidence that veterans' conditions had improved.

Interviews with VARO management revealed the delays reducing benefits for temporary 100 percent disability evaluations occurred because other claims processing activities had higher priority. VARO management stated it focused on rating-related claims due to production standards set by Central Office and the national goal to reduce the backlog of claims over 125 days old. After completing our review of 25 available claims, we provided VARO management with the 3 claims remaining from our universe of 28 to determine whether similar action is required. We did not review these three claims because they were unavailable for review, as the folders were either off station or worked by another office.

*Follow-Up to
Prior VA OIG
Inspection*

In our previous report, *Inspection of the VA Regional Office, Hartford, Connecticut* (Report No. 11-00514-264, September 7, 2011), VARO staff incorrectly processed 18 of 30 temporary 100 percent disability evaluations (60 percent) we reviewed. The majority of errors occurred because VARO staff did not establish suspense diaries for future VA medical reexaminations of temporary 100 percent disability evaluations in the electronic record. In response to a recommendation in our report, *Audit of 100 Percent Disability Evaluations* (Report No. 09-03359-71, January 24, 2011), the Acting Under Secretary for Benefits agreed to review all temporary 100 percent disability evaluations and ensure each had a future examination date entered in the electronic record. As such, we made no specific recommendation for improvement to the Hartford VARO during our 2011 benefits inspection.

During our September 2015 inspection, we did not identify any errors where staff did not establish suspense diaries for reexaminations of temporary 100 percent disability evaluations. The majority of errors identified during this inspection occurred because VARO staff delayed finalizing benefits reductions.

TBI Claims

The Department of Defense and VBA commonly define a TBI as a traumatically induced structural injury or a physiological disruption of brain function caused by an external force. The major residual disabilities of TBI fall into three main categories—physical, cognitive, and behavioral. VBA policy requires staff to evaluate these residual disabilities. Additionally, VBA policy requires that employees assigned to the appeals team, the special operations team, and the quality review team to complete training on TBI claims processing.

In response to a recommendation in our report, *Systemic Issues Reported During Inspections at VA Regional Offices* (Report No. 11-00510-167, May 18, 2011), VBA agreed to develop and implement a strategy for ensuring the accuracy of TBI claims decisions. In May 2011, VBA provided guidance to VARO Directors to implement a policy requiring a second signature on each TBI case an RVSR evaluates until the RVSR demonstrates 90 percent accuracy in TBI claims processing. The policy indicates

second-signature reviewers come from the same pool of staff as those used to conduct local station quality reviews.

VSC staff correctly processed all five TBI claims completed from January 1, 2015, through June 30, 2015. We attribute the improved accuracy rates for TBI disability claims processing to the VARO's compliance with VBA's policy, which allows RVSRs to independently evaluate these claims once a 90 percent accuracy rate has been obtained.

*Follow-Up to
Prior VA OIG
Inspection*

In our previous report, *Inspection of the VA Regional Office, Hartford, Connecticut* (Report No. 11-00514-264, September 7, 2011), we determined 7 of the 10 cases completed by VARO staff contained processing errors. Generally, errors associated with TBI claims processing occurred because VARO staff found TBI evaluation criteria to be complex and difficult to apply. In addition, VARO staff indicated they used insufficient VA medical examinations reports to evaluate claims. RVSRs were reluctant to return insufficient medical examination reports to VA facilities, because the process would further delay claims processing. We recommended the Hartford Director provide RVSRs with refresher training on how to evaluation disabilities related to TBI injuries.

We did not identify any of these errors during this inspection. Given the improvement demonstrated by VARO staff when processing TBI claims, we concluded the VARO's actions in response to our prior recommendation were effective.

**Special
Monthly
Compensation
and Ancillary
Benefits**

As the concept of rating disabilities evolved, it was realized that for certain types of disabilities, the basic rate of compensation was not sufficient for the level of disability present. Therefore, SMC was established to recognize the severity of certain disabilities or combinations of disabilities by adding an additional compensation to the basic rate of payment. SMC represents payments for "quality of life" issues such as the loss of an eye or limb, or the need to rely on others for daily life activities, like bathing or eating. Generally, VBA grants entitlement to SMC when the following conditions exist:

- Anatomical loss or loss of use of specific organs, sensory functions, or extremities
- Disabilities that render the veteran permanently bedridden or in need of aid and attendance
- Combinations of severe disabilities that significantly affect locomotion
- Existence of multiple, independent disabilities evaluated as 50 to 100 percent disabling

- Existence of multiple disabilities that render the veteran in need of such a degree of special skilled assistance that, without it, the veteran would be permanently confined to a skilled-care nursing home

Ancillary benefits are secondary benefits that VBA staff must consider when evaluating claims for SMC. Examples of ancillary benefits are:

- Dependents' Educational Assistance under title 38 United States Code, Chapter 35
- Specially Adapted Housing Grants, which allow veterans with certain disabilities such as amputations or paralysis to purchase or renovate a barrier-free home
- Special Home Adaptation Grants, which help blinded veterans or those with upper-extremity handicaps to renovate a home
- Automobile and Other Conveyance and Adaptive Equipment Allowance

VBA policy requires staff to address the issues of SMC and ancillary benefits whenever they can grant entitlement. We examined whether VARO staff accurately processed entitlement to SMC and ancillary benefits associated with anatomical loss, loss of use of two or more extremities, or bilateral blindness with visual acuity of 5/200 or worse.

VARO staff incorrectly processed one of three veterans' claims involving SMC and ancillary benefits. This error affected a veteran's benefits and resulted in approximately \$21,588 in underpayments. VARO management concurred with this error.

In this case, an RVSR considered claims for increase for a veteran with service-connected multiple sclerosis. In considering the issues, however, the RVSR overlooked an error in the previous rating decision that assigned an incorrect level of SMC for 3 years before this highest rate took effect. In the previous rating decision, the RVSR had assigned SMC at the "Housebound" level, despite noting in the decision that the veteran has loss of use of both legs above the knee. This loss of use entitled the veteran to a higher level of SMC for the period from 2000 until 2003. As a result, this veteran was underpaid a total of \$21,588 over a period of 3 years and 6 months.

We determined the VARO generally followed VBA policy for processing SMC claims because staff completed the remaining SMC claims correctly. Because there is no trend in this area, we made no recommendation for improvement.

Recommendation

1. We recommended the Hartford VA Regional Office Director conduct a review of the three temporary 100 percent disability evaluations remaining from our inspection universe as of August 11, 2015, and take appropriate action.

Management Comments

The VARO Director concurred with our recommendation and reported action had been taken to review the remaining temporary 100 percent disability evaluations OIG provided.

OIG Response

The Director's action is responsive to the recommendation.

II. Data Integrity

Dates of Claim

To ensure all claims receive proper attention and timely processing, VBA policy directs that staff use the earliest date stamp shown on the claim document as the date of claim. VBA relies on accurate dates of claim to establish and track key performance measures, including the average days to complete a claim. We focused our review on whether VSC staff followed VBA policy for establishing dates of claim in the electronic record.

VARO staff established correct dates of claims in the electronic records for all 30 veterans' cases we reviewed. As such, we determined VARO staff followed VBA policy when establishing claims in the electronic record and made no recommendation for improvement in this area.

III. Management Controls

Benefit Reductions

VBA policy provides for the payment of compensation to veterans for conditions they incurred or aggravated during military service. The amount of monthly compensation to which a veteran is entitled may change because his or her service-connected disability may improve. Improper payments associated with benefits reductions generally occur when beneficiaries receive payments to which they are not entitled because VAROs do not take the actions required to ensure correct payments for their levels of disability.

When the VARO obtains evidence that a lower disability evaluation would result in a reduction or discontinuance of current compensation payments, VSC staff must inform the beneficiary of the proposed reduction in benefits. In order to provide beneficiaries due process, VBA allows 60 days for the veteran to submit additional evidence to show that compensation payments should continue at their present level. If the VARO does not receive additional evidence within that period, RVSRs will make a final determination to reduce or discontinue the benefit. On the 65th day following due process notification, action is required to reduce the evaluation and thereby minimize overpayments.

On April 3, 2014, and again on July 5, 2015, VBA leadership modified its policy regarding the processing of claims requiring benefits reductions. The modified policy no longer included the requirement for VARO staff to take “immediate action” to process these reductions. In lieu of merely removing the vague standard of “immediate,” VBA should have provided clearer guidance on prioritizing this work to ensure sound financial stewardship of these monetary benefits.

Finding 2

Hartford VARO Lacked Oversight To Ensure Timely Action on Benefits Reductions

VARO staff delayed processing 14 of 30 cases involving benefits reductions—11 affected veterans’ benefits and 3 had the potential to affect veterans’ benefits. These delays occurred due to a lack of emphasis on timely processing benefits reductions. As a result, VA made 87 improper payments to 11 veterans from June 2014 to August 2015, totaling approximately \$71,709.

Delayed Processing Actions

For the 14 cases with processing delays, an average of approximately 6 months elapsed before staff took the required actions to reduce benefits. The most significant improper payment involved VSC staff proposing to reduce a veteran’s benefits in February 2014; however, the final rating decision to reduce benefits did not occur until May 2015, approximately one year beyond the date when the reduction of benefits should have occurred. As a result, the veteran received approximately \$28,849 in improper

payments. VARO management agreed with the 14 processing delays we identified.

Generally, these delays occurred because other claims processing activities had higher priority. VARO management stated it focused on rating related claims due to production standards set by Central Office and the national goal to reduce the backlog of claims over 125 days old. Because of the processing delays, veterans received erroneous benefits payments.

It is a VBA management responsibility to address this issue, which entails millions of dollars in improper payments. Where VBA lacks sufficient staff to address properly its management responsibilities, it should make its case for an increase in full-time equivalents through the normal budget process. We concluded that providing oversight of benefits reductions is necessary to ensure sound financial stewardship and minimize improper benefits payments.

Recommendation

2. We recommended the Hartford VA Regional Office Director implement a plan to ensure claims processing staff prioritize actions related to benefits reductions to minimize improper payments to veterans.

Management Comments

The VARO Director concurred with our recommendation and implemented a plan to ensure claims processing staff prioritize actions related to benefit reductions. The plan included increased staffing on the non-rating team to enable the VSC to centralize the processing of benefits reduction actions.

OIG Response

The Director's comments and actions are responsive to the recommendation. We will follow up as required.

Appendix A VARO Profile and Scope of Inspection

Organization	The Hartford VARO administers a variety of services and benefits, including compensation benefits; vocational rehabilitation and employment assistance; fiduciary; specially adapted housing grants; benefits counseling; and outreach to homeless, elderly, minority and women veterans, and public affairs.
Resources	As of August 2015, the Hartford VARO reported a staffing level of 114 full-time employees. Of this total, the VSC had 91 employees assigned.
Workload	As of August 2015, VBA reported the Hartford VARO had 2,287 pending compensation claims with 769 (34 percent) pending greater than 125 days. As reported by VBA's Systematic Technical Accuracy Review program as of August 2015, the overall claims-based accuracy of the VARO's compensation rating-related decisions was 91.4 percent. We did not test the reliability of this data.
Scope and Methodology	<p>VBA has 56 VAROs and a VSC in Wyoming that process disability claims and provide a range of services to veterans. In September 2015, we evaluated the Hartford VARO to see how well it accomplishes this mission.</p> <p>We reviewed selected management, claims processing, and administrative activities to evaluate compliance with VBA policies regarding benefits delivery and nonmedical services provided to veterans and other beneficiaries. We interviewed managers and employees and reviewed veterans' claims folders. Prior to conducting our onsite inspection, we coordinated with VA OIG criminal investigators to provide a briefing designed to alert VARO staff to the indicators of fraud in claims processing.</p> <p>Our review included 25 of the total 28 temporary 100 percent disability evaluations (89 percent) selected from VBA's Corporate Database. These claims represented all instances in which VARO staff had granted temporary 100 percent disability evaluations for at least 18 months as of August 11, 2015. This is generally the longest period a temporary 100 percent disability evaluation may be assigned without review, according to VBA policy.</p> <p>Three of the 28 claims folders were unavailable for review because the folders either were off station or worked by another office. We provided VARO management with 3 claims remaining from our universe of 28 claims as of August 11, 2015, for review. We reviewed five disability claims related to TBI that the VARO completed from January 1, 2015 through June 30, 2015. We examined a total of three veterans' claims involving entitlement to SMC and related ancillary benefits (100 percent) completed by VARO staff from July 1, 2014, through June 30, 2015.</p>

We reviewed 30 of 1,151 dates of claims (3 percent) pending at the VARO during the period from April 1 through June 30, 2015 pending as of August 11, 2015. Additionally, we looked at 30 of the 168 benefits reductions cases (18 percent) VARO staff completed from April 1 through June 30, 2015.

Data Reliability

We used computer-processed data from the Veterans Service Network's Operations Reports and Awards. To test for reliability, we reviewed the data to determine whether any data were missing from key fields, included any calculation errors, or were outside the time frame requested. We also assessed whether the data contained obvious duplication of records, alphabetic or numeric characters in incorrect fields, or illogical relationships among data elements.

Further, we compared veterans' names, file numbers, Social Security numbers, VARO numbers, dates of claim, and decision dates as provided in the data received with information contained in the 93 claims folders we reviewed. The 93 claims folders related to temporary 100 percent disability evaluations, TBI claims, SMC and ancillary benefits, as well as completed claims related to dates of claims and benefits reductions.

Our testing of the data disclosed that they were sufficiently reliable for our inspection objectives. Our comparison of the data with information contained in the veterans' claims folders reviewed in conjunction with our inspection of the VARO did not disclose any problems with data reliability.

Inspection Standards

We conducted this inspection in accordance with the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency's *Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation*.

Appendix B Inspection Summary

Table 2 reflects the operational activities inspected, applicable criteria, and whether or not we had reasonable assurance of VARO compliance.

Table 2. Hartford VARO Inspection Summary

Operational Activities Inspected	Criteria	Reasonable Assurance of Compliance
Disability Claims Processing		
Temporary 100 Percent Disability Evaluations	Determine whether VARO staff properly reviewed temporary 100 percent disability evaluations. (38 CFR 3.103(b)), (38 CFR 3.105(e)), (38 CFR 3.327), (M21-1 MR Part IV, Subpart ii, Chapter 2, Section J), (M21-1MR Part III, Subpart iv, Chapter 3, Section C.17.e)	No
Traumatic Brain Injury Claims	Determine whether VARO staff properly processed claims for service connection for all disabilities related to in-service TBI. (FL 08-34 and 08-36) (Training Letter 09-01)	Yes
Special Monthly Compensation and Ancillary Benefits	Determine whether VARO staff properly processed SMC and correctly granted entitlement to ancillary benefits. (38 CFR 3.350, 3.352, 3.807, 3.808, 3.809, 3.809a, 4.63, and 4.64), (M21-1MR IV.ii.2.H and I)	Yes
Data Integrity		
Dates of Claim	Determine whether VARO staff accurately established dates of claim in the electronic records. (38 CFR 3.1 (p) and (r)), (M21-4, Appendix A and B), (M21-1MR, III.ii.1.C.10.a), (M21-1MR, III.ii.1.B.6 and 7), (M21-1MR, III.ii.2.B.8.f), (M21-1MR, III.i.2.A.2.c) (VBMS User Guide), (M21-4, Chapter 4.07), (M23-1, Part 1, 1.06)	Yes
Management Controls		
Benefits Reductions	Determine whether VARO staff timely and accurately processed disability evaluation reductions or terminations. (38 CFR 3.103(b)(2)), (38 CFR 3.105(e)), (38 CFR 3.501), (M21-1MR.IV.ii.3.A.3.e), (M21-1MR.I.2.B.7.a), (M21-1MR.I.2.C), (M21-1MR.I.ii.2.f), (M21-4, Chapter 2.05(f)(4)), (<i>Compensation & Pension Service Bulletin</i> , October 2010)	No

Source: VA OIG

CFR=Code of Federal Regulations, FL=Fast Letter, M=Manual, MR=Manual Rewrite, VBMS=Veterans Benefits Management System

Appendix C Director of VARO Hartford Comments

Department of Veterans Affairs

Memorandum

Date: November 12, 2015
From: Director, VA Regional Office Hartford, Connecticut (308/21)
Subj: Inspection of the VA Regional Office, Hartford, Connecticut
To: Assistant Inspector General for Audits and Evaluations (52)

1. During the week of September 21, 2015, OIG conducted an inspection of the Veterans Service Center operations at the Hartford VA Regional Office. Our responses to the recommendations are incorporated in the attached report.
2. Specific responses to each OIG recommendation of the subject report are provided in the attachment to this memorandum.
3. We appreciate the courtesy and cooperation your staff showed during the Inspection. If you have any questions or would like to discuss our response, please contact me at (860) 666-7300.

(original signed by:)

William F. Streitberger
Director

cc: North Atlantic District Office

Attachment

OIG Site Visit Response

Hartford Veterans Affairs Regional Office

Recommendation 1:	We recommended the Hartford VA Regional Office Director conduct a review of the three temporary 100 percent disability evaluations remaining from our inspection universe as of August 11, 2015, and take appropriate action.
RO Response:	<p>Concur. Hartford reviewed the three temporary 100 percent disability evaluations and all necessary actions were completed by September 30, 2015. The actions taken were:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Veteran 1: The final reduction of the temporary 100 percent rating was completed on September 24, 2015. 2. Veteran 2: Chapter 35 was granted in 2011. The last rating decision dated June 7, 2013, determined that prostate cancer was permanent and the Veteran was no longer subject to routine future exams. No action was needed as there was no End Product pending. 3. Veteran 3: The Veteran was deemed permanent and total and Chapter 35 was granted on September 30, 2015. <p>We request closure of this recommendation based on the evidence provided above.</p>
Applicable Attachment(s):	N/A
Recommendation 2:	We recommended the Hartford VA Regional Office Director implement a plan to ensure claims processing staff prioritize actions related to benefits reductions to minimize improper payments to veterans.
RO Response:	<p>Concur. On November 2, 2015, the Hartford Veterans Service Center implemented a plan to ensure claims processing staff prioritize actions related to benefit reductions. The plan included staffing the non-rating team with an additional two Veterans Service Representatives (VSR) and one Rating Veterans Service Representative (RVSR). This staffing allocation increased the non-rating team from 4 to 7 fulltime employees. Prior to the staffing reallocation and centralization, benefits reduction claims were rated by RVSRs on the Core, Express, or Special Operations lanes, and were managed alongside the rating related claims.</p> <p>The increase in staff has enabled the Veterans Service Center to centralize the processing of benefits reduction actions on the Non-Rating team. Additionally, the RVSR moved to the Non-Rating team will only be assigned non-rating workload, further allowing for the prioritization of benefit reduction claims.</p> <p>We request closure of this recommendation based on the evidence provided above.</p>
Applicable Attachment(s):	N/A

Appendix D **OIG Contact and Staff Acknowledgments**

OIG Contact	For more information about this report, please contact the Office of Inspector General at (202) 461-4720.
Acknowledgments	Nora Stokes, Director Kelly Crawford Kyle Flannery Suzanne Love Lisa Van Haeren Nelvy Viguera Butler

Appendix E Report Distribution

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