



Department of Veterans Affairs

Office of Inspector General

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A Statement from the Deputy Inspector General

OIG Conducts Surprise Inspections of VBA Regional Offices After Identifying Inappropriate Shredding Practices at the Los Angeles Regional Office

Washington, DC – The Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General (OIG) received an anonymous allegation that staff at the Los Angeles VA Regional Office (VARO) were inappropriately shredding documents related to veterans' disability compensation claims. The complainant also alleged that supervisors were instructing staff to shred these documents. The OIG immediately deployed a team of inspectors to determine the merits of these allegations.

The OIG published an interim report <http://www.va.gov/oig/pubs/VAOIG-15-04652-448.pdf> on August 17, 2015, and substantiated that the Los Angeles VARO staff were not following the Veterans Benefits Administration's (VBA) January 2011 policy on management of veterans' and other Governmental paper records, resulting in nine claims-related documents inappropriately being placed in shred bins. The potential shredding of these documents would have prevented them from being included as part of the veterans' permanent records and potentially affected veterans' benefits.

We found that the Los Angeles VARO Records Management Officer (RMO) position was vacant from August 2014 until our inspection in February 2015. RMOs are responsible for reviewing all claims-related materials submitted for shredding and ensuring that the destruction of documents complies with VBA policy. Staff assigned to perform the RMO's responsibilities were not properly trained on reviewing documents destined for shredding. They would only observe documents as they dumped the documents into the bin for contractor shredding. Not filling the RMO position weakened the final control in the VARO's authorized shredding process, which VBA established to prevent improper shredding of claims-related documents. If not for our review, it is likely that nine claims-related documents would have been destroyed.

The VARO also failed to provide any documentation of required shred logs for the past 2 years. In fact, the staff were unaware of VBA's requirement to log any material that was determined inappropriate for destruction. In the absence of the shredding logs, we could not measure the effectiveness of the VARO's reviews over the past 2 years to prevent claims-related documents from being improperly destroyed compared to what we found during our 1 week on site. The OIG team returned the nine claims-related documents to the VARO Director for immediate action. Eight of these documents had the potential to affect veterans' benefits. We did not substantiate that supervisors were instructing staff to shred these documents.

In light of the issues identified at the Los Angeles VARO, I deployed 10 teams of benefits inspectors and auditors from various OIG offices across the country to determine whether this was an isolated issue or a systemic issue across VBA's nationwide network of VAROs. To gain the element of surprise, we performed unannounced inspections, and all teams arrived at the preselected locations simultaneously on July 20, 2015. The locations were: Atlanta, GA; Baltimore, MD; Chicago, IL; Houston, TX; New Orleans, LA; Oakland, CA; Philadelphia, PA; Reno, NV; San Juan, PR; and St. Petersburg, FL.

The OIG team gathered and reviewed documents from shred bins, which are the last repository for documents prior to destruction. Our preliminary findings indicate that inappropriate shredding is also occurring at other VAROs and controls generally appear too weak to adequately protect against inappropriate shredding.

In hopes of identifying other veterans who may have had their claims shredded by the Los Angeles VARO, I initiated a review of veterans' complaints of delayed VBA claim reviews received in the OIG Hotline. This additional review is important because neither VBA nor the OIG can identify claims-related information inappropriately destroyed. The OIG plans to perform similar work at other VAROs where shredding practices and controls are determined inadequate during the OIG's surprise nationwide inspection. Results of the 10 site reviews and the review of complaints received via the OIG Hotline are pending.

I believe that improper shredding of veterans' claims-related documents, no matter how small, has to be completely eradicated if the Department hopes to regain veterans' trust as this causes excessive delays and can result in incorrect decisions to veterans attempting to obtain benefits.

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