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Report: VA's Performance on Benefits Slips or Is Unchanged

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McClatchy Newspapers

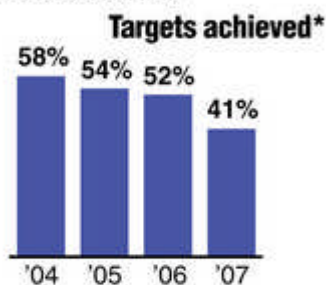
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Losing ground

The waiting time for processing veterans' disability claims continues to increase ...



... while the overall ability of the VA to meet a range of its goals continues to decline



*"Targets achieved" refers to program goals set by the VA in disability, health and other benefit programs

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Source: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
2007 Performance and Accountability Report
Graphic: Angela Smith

use goals to move and improve performance."

But for Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., the report is more evidence that the agency hasn't been upfront with Congress about its performance or its needs.

"It is extremely frustrating to hear the song and dance that we are doing better when the reality is we are not," said Murray, a member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee. "I want to say I'm surprised. But I'm not."

The report also shows that:

- The accuracy rate for disability claims in 2007 remained the same as in 2006, at 88 percent. The VA's long-term goal for accuracy is 98 percent, but the agency has been stuck in the high 80s for the past five years.

Washington - The Department of Veterans Affairs fell farther behind this year in its attempts to give veterans timely decisions on their disability claims, new records show.

The latest numbers are in an annual report the VA prepares for Congress detailing a range of short- and long-term goals for its disability, health and other benefit programs. Overall, the agency either has fallen behind or has made no progress in improving its performance in more than half of what it lists as its key goals.

In the benefits measure the VA has said is "most critical to veterans" — the speed of processing disability claims — the agency lost ground for the third year in a row.

Moreover, McClatchy has found that the VA put a positive spin on many of its numbers, and in two instances provided Congress with incorrect or incomplete figures.

The agency said it took an average of 183 days to process a claim in fiscal 2007, longer than in any of the five years tracked in the report. Processing exceeded its 2007 goal of 160 days and its long-term goal of eventually reducing processing time to 125 days.

Congress and veterans closely watch the time it takes the VA to process claims, and the agency has vowed in previous years to pick up the pace. When it was asked about its processing speed last year, for example, the VA told McClatchy that hiring new workers would help it increase production and decrease its backlog of claims in 2007.

In fact, processing time increased by an average of six days, and the backlog of pending claims rose from 377,681 to 391,257, the agency's records show.

The VA said this week that it was aggressively tackling the issue, hiring more than 1,000 workers, boosting overtime and revamping training. The agency also said it was receiving more disability claims than it had at any time in recent history, and that it had received more than it had expected in 2007.

Beyond that, the agency said that meeting or exceeding its goals — what it generally calls "targets" — wasn't always the best measure of success.

"The VA sets goals to measure how we are doing so that we can continuously improve performance," said Bob Henke, the assistant secretary for management. "We

- The agency continues to be tardy in handing in its homework to Congress. Only 40 percent of the reports due to Congress are completed on time. Of the questions Congress asks of the VA — for example, follow-ups to questions asked in oversight hearings — less than 30 percent are answered on time.
- The average time needed to process pension claims for veterans jumped to 104 days, the longest in five years and well above the long-term goal of 60 days.

It takes two or three years for new workers to become fully proficient in their jobs, the VA said, which has hindered its ability to achieve some goals.

"They are way behind, and they are playing catch-up," said Randy Reese, the national service director for the advocacy group Disabled American Veterans. "So they started to hire new people in 2007 to knock down the backlog. The backlog has a five-year advantage."

In many sections of the report, the VA looks past the missed goals to put the best face on its efforts.

Under "Positive 2007 Outcomes," for example, the VA highlights "accurate claims processing," saying that the "accuracy rate . . . was maintained at 88 percent, helping to ensure that veterans receive the proper level of monetary benefits." Only elsewhere does the report note that 88 percent is well below the agency's long-term goal of 98 percent.

The VA reports that 95 percent or more of outpatient visits are scheduled within 30 days of patients' desired dates, a fact it's touted to Congress repeatedly. The agency's inspector general, however, found this year that only 75 percent of the visits it examined took place within 30 days. The VA said it didn't agree with that finding and was examining the issue further.

The VA also claimed that customer-satisfaction ratings by inpatients at VA hospitals are 10 points higher than ratings from private-sector hospitals. In fact, the number the agency used as a comparison is wrong, and as a result the advantage for VA hospitals is half as big as the VA claims.

The VA told McClatchy on Monday that the mistake was made by a "transposition error and we will be fixing that as soon as possible."

It does appear that the agency is meeting some of its goals, but only because those goals have changed.

Until this year, the VA had a goal to handle appeals for denied claims in 365 days. This year, the average processing time increased to 660 days — but the goal was lengthened to 675 days.