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**Heller, Casey Announce New Working Group to Tackle VA Backlog**

**(Washington, D.C.)** –U.S. Senators Dean Heller (R-NV) and Bob Casey (D-PA) have joined forces to launch the bipartisan VA Backlog Working Group, a united effort by lawmakers, veterans, Veterans Service Organizations and veteran advocates to put an end to the Veterans Affairs (VA) disability claim backlog.

 “The current backlog system is a broken wheel that must be fixed. For decades, lawmakers and the numerous Administrations have tried to patch the problem, but that simply hasn’t worked. This Working Group is designed to bring all ideas and thoughts to the table so we can develop new, comprehensive, and bipartisan ideas to ending the backlog. I’m excited to continue working with Senator Casey and members of the veteran community to ensure our government’s responsibility to the nation’s veterans is fulfilled,” said **Senator Dean Heller**.

**CASEY QUOTE**

Currently, nearly 800,000 veterans are stuck waiting for their claims to be processed. Considering the backlog has been problematic for nearly twenty years, Senators Heller and Casey believe that the problem must be solved and are committed to developing a comprehensive approach to tackle the problem. This Working Group is dedicated to bringing together the experience and creative thinking of veterans, government officials, and policy experts to ensure veterans receive their benefits in a timely manner.

Already, the VA Backlog Working Group has convened with Veteran Service Organizations and veterans’ advocates to garner input and ideas about the causes and possible solutions to the backlog. The Senators have also written to President Obama urging him to prioritize this issue. Additionally, Senator Heller has sent letters to Veterans Affairs officials asking what resources are necessary to address the problem.

“AUSN is extremely pleased that Senators Dean Heller and Bob Casey have created a Working Group that will, in collaboration with veteran service organizations and the Department of Veterans Affairs, address the overwhelming claims backlog facing our Veterans,” **said Casey Coane, Executive Director, Association of the United States Navy (AUSN).** “With more than one million American service members leaving the armed forces in the next five years, it is incredibly vital that we provide the VA the proper support and initiatives to help streamline the disability claims process. AUSN is anxious to help contribute to these efforts in any way that we can.”

“Even as VA’s claims processing transformation efforts have started showing some hopeful signs of progress, it is crucial that Congressional oversight remain just as aggressive, if not more so, over the next several years. As DAV and other VSOs continue working with Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Burr and the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee to address gaps in legislation, regulation or funding required to complete this transformation, we also welcome the new Senate Backlog Working Group which can provide another Congressional forum to help build support for serious, long term solutions to ensure that all veterans’ claims for benefits are decided right the first time. We look forward to contributing our knowledge and experience of the claims process with Senator Heller, Senator Casey and all members of the new Senate Backlog Working Group” **said Barry Jesinoski, Executive Director for DAV**.

“This is a common-sense initiative that should help VA in achieving its goals. The Backlog Working Group put together by Senators Heller and Casey is a meaningful, bipartisan effort to work with The American Legion, other VSOs, and VA in finding effective solutions. We are especially encouraged to see that this group will also be working with VA’s regional offices, which vary widely in their claims processing efficiency,” said **James E. Koutz, National Commander of The American Legion**.

"Far too many veterans continue to wait for claim decisions on the benefits that they have earned fighting for our country. We have much more work to do on their behalf to bring the VA disability claims backlog to zero, which is why we so appreciate that Senators Casey and Heller are creating this important working group. Senators Casey and Heller have been strong leaders in this fight and share our determination to end the backlog once and for all,” said **Alex Nicholson, Legislative Director of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America**.

About the VA Backlog Working Group

The VA backlog has dated back to 1994, when Jesse Brown was Secretary of Veterans Affairs. Between 1990 and 1994, the time to process a claim went from 150 days to more than 200 days. In March 1994, the VA backlog reached a then-record number, 560,000 claims, and has lingered near that figure for nearly two decades.

Since then, efforts to end the backlog have failed. Clearly, the current system is broken. Numerous laws, blue ribbon commissions, Inspector General Reports, Government Accountability Reports, and hearings in both the House and the Senate have examined ways to fix this inefficiency. There have been pledge of support and copious resourced dedicated to this effort, and guarantees from the VA that, in time, this problem will be fixed.

To date, that has not happened, and our veterans deserve much better than what they are receiving. Congress has a responsibility to those who have sacrificed to ensure our way of life.

Working on a bipartisan basis, this Working Group is committed to tackling the backlog, taking a broad approach that the current system is not working and must examined through an expansive lens of possible solutions.

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