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Editorial: Vets wait, and wait, for VA to fix claims

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It's a national disgrace how long veterans have to wait on their disability claims, and unfortunately, it's not getting any better.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, trying to dig out from an avalanche of claims from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, has repeatedly promised to fix the mess.

But as McClatchy Newspapers reported last week, a new paperless processing system isn't paying off yet, and two recent audits question whether the VA's "transformation" plan will ever work.

In fact, the waits got longer last year at most VA regional offices, and completed claims were often incorrect, according to McClatchy's analysis.

That worsening performance includes the office in Oakland, which has a branch in Sacramento and is supposed to serve veterans from the Oregon line to Bakersfield. Its backlog of claims older than 125 days increased from 76 percent in January 2012 to 82.5 percent in December 2012. The average days pending for claims jumped from 283 days to 441 days. Those numbers are far worse than the national averages, which are nothing to brag about.

There was one slight glimmer of hope: The accuracy rate in Oakland improved from 83 percent of claims last January to 88 percent in December. That still means one out of eight cases has errors.

The waits in California and elsewhere are so bad that thousands of veterans are dying before their claims for physical and mental injuries are approved. In 2011-12, the VA paid \$437 million in posthumous benefits to families of nearly 19,500 veterans, up from just \$8 million three years earlier, the Center for Investigative Reporting says.

The VA's response to its continued struggles is like a broken record. The agency notes that it has completed a record 1 million claims each of the past three fiscal years. It says the new processing system was installed last year in 18 of the 56 regional offices and will reach the remainder this year. It maintains it's on track to reach the goal of finishing claims within 125 days with 98 percent accuracy by 2015.

In other words, keep waiting for things to get better.

That infuriates veterans like Glenn Zogg. He joined the Marines right out of high school in 1955 and served until 1971, when he was medically retired. Now living in Forbestown in Yuba County, he is 40 percent disabled due to hearing loss and lung damage.

Eighteen months ago, he filed a claim for full disability for heart problems caused by exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam. Last November, the VA office in Oakland sent him a letter asking for patience and saying that the average wait time was 24 months, except if veterans are

•homeless or have a terminal illness.

He fired off letters to President Barack Obama and Sen. Barbara Boxer about the problem. Zogg told The Bee's editorial board Tuesday he's more worried about veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan than older vets like himself.

He's right. The White House and Congress need to light a fire under the VA. Its workload will get even worse as an estimated 1 million active-duty service members leave the military in the next five years. There's no excuse for forcing our wounded warriors to wait so long.

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