

# Eliminating VA Disabilities Claims Backlog is a High Priority in FY 2015 Budget Request

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VA specified three high priorities in the President's FY 2015 Budget Request: increasing veteran access to benefits and services, eliminating the disability claims backlog, and ending veteran homelessness.

The FY 2015 budget request provides a combination of people, process and technology initiatives to improve and eliminate the claims backlog. The goal is to eliminate all claims older than 125 days by the end of 2015. The backlog currently sits around 360,000 claims, down from a high of 611,000 in March of 2013.

Significant progress was made in reducing the backlog during 2013, part of which was due to implementation of mandatory overtime. However, progress somewhat stalled from November to early February of this year with the backlog hovering around 400,000. This may be due in part to the elimination of overtime during the holiday months. Overtime resumed in January and the backlog currently totals 360,629 as of Monday, March 17th.

VA is requesting \$4B in IT funding, up 4.7% over FY 2014 enacted levels, including \$599M in development, modernization and enhancement (DME), 15% of the total IT budget request, up 9.7% from current year enacted levels.

The FY 2015 budget request proposes an investment of \$312 million to bring leading-edge technology to the claims backlog: \$173 million for the Veterans Benefit Management System (VBMS) and \$139 million for the Veterans Claims Intake Program (VCIP) to continue the conversion of paper records. However, tracing these figures to the FY 2015 Exhibit 53 is more than a little difficult. VBMS is the major software component of the 21st Century Paperless Delivery of Veterans Benefits Exhibit 53 IT investment line item. This line item shows a total FY 2014 enacted funding level of \$129 million with a proposed budget of \$143.5 million for FY 2015, a \$14.5 million increase. I was unable to find an IT investment line item to correspond to the VCIP.

Notable IT investment line items from the Exhibit 53 include \$2.3B for the operations and maintenance of VA's IT infrastructure, up 6.9%; \$269M for the development and operations of the VistA Evolution effort; and \$57M for the development and sustainment of interoperability for the electronic health record.

According to VA officials the claims backlog grew due to more complex cases and a 2010 major revision in Agent Orange-related claims. Additionally, the VBMS system seems to be plagued with nearly weekly shutdowns that halt processing for hours or even days.

One tool implemented in January of this year which promises to speed the claims process is the Health Artifact and Image Management Solution (HAMIS). HAMIS gives VA claims processors electronic access to a complete, certified and final military record for any veteran who left the military after the first of the year. Deployment is still underway and not without glitches, such as returning duplicate records or two different veterans in the same file.

Despite the challenges, VA officials are optimistic that the claims backlog can and will be reduced, and the 2015 goal achieved.