

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

October 14, 2009

The Honorable Robert M. Gates
Secretary of Defense
United States Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

The Honorable Michael J. Astrue
Commissioner
Social Security Administration
6401 Security Blvd.
Baltimore, MD 21235

Dear Mr. Gates and Mr. Astrue,

As you know, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently completed a study on access to Social Security disability insurance (DI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) disability benefits for service members wounded in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom (GAO-09-762, September 2009). We were pleased to see that the study shows that the Social Security Administration (SSA), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and the Department of Defense (DOD) have made significant progress in improving outreach and service delivery in this area.

Specifically, the study found that SSA, VA, and DOD had worked together to make a number of improvements in outreach to wounded warriors to inform them about SSA's disability benefits. GAO also found that SSA has taken measures to expedite disability claims for wounded warriors, and that DOD is assisting with this effort by providing SSA with a list of wounded service members that is updated weekly, so that SSA can identify claims that these individuals submit and target them for expedited processing.

We commend you both for the proven success of your efforts to ensure that wounded warriors are aware of SSA's disability benefits and that their claims for these benefits are processed more rapidly.

The GAO report also identified several areas in need of improvement, however. One key area involved SSA's ability to obtain DOD medical records needed to adjudicate claims. GAO found that although SSA has made significant strides in expediting the disability claims of wounded warriors, processing these claims is sometimes slowed by delays in receiving medical records from DOD. GAO recommended that SSA and DOD "work together to better meet SSA's need for obtaining military medical records in a timely manner for processing DI and SSI applications from wounded warriors," and stated that this effort "should consider how to ensure records that are stored electronically are also electronically transferable." (pp. 41-42) GAO also noted in the report that

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although officials at both SSA and DOD expressed interest in working together to develop a mechanism for electronic transfer, "the agencies have no formal plans to do so." (p.39)

We strongly urge you to act on GAO's recommendation to work together to develop a system that will allow for more rapid transfer of medical records from DOD to SSA, including electronic transfer to the extent feasible, so that delays in processing claims can be avoided. In particular, we urge both agencies to move promptly on developing a formal plan for attaining this goal, with clear objectives, milestones, and time frames. Please respond by providing us, by March 1, 2010, with a copy of this formal plan to address the issues that have been raised by GAO in its report.

Again, we commend you both on the success of your efforts to improve service delivery for wounded warriors who may be eligible for Social Security or SSI disability benefits. We look forward to working with both agencies to ensure that when those who have made significant sacrifices in service of our country apply for these benefits, they receive excellent service and a timely decision on their claim.

Sincerely,



John S. Tanner
Chairman

Subcommittee on Social Security
Committee on Ways and Means



Susan A. Davis
Chairwoman

Subcommittee on Military Personnel
Committee on Armed Services



Sam Johnson
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Social Security
Committee on Ways and Means



Joe Wilson
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Military Personnel
Committee on Armed Services