

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

October 14, 2009

The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Ave., NW  
Washington, DC 20420

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

Dear General Shinseki and Mr. Astrue,

As you know, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently completed a study on access to Social Security Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) disability benefits for service members wounded in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) (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 have 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, as part of this effort, both SSA and VA worked together to improve the quality and speed with which VA transfers medical records to SSA.

We commend you for the proven success of your efforts to improve outreach to wounded warriors about SSA's disability benefits and to ensure 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 remaining gaps in outreach, especially for wounded warriors who have already been discharged from military service. GAO expressed particular concern about outreach to: 1) veterans who were discharged between 2001 and 2007, before more intensive outreach efforts began; 2) veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or traumatic brain injury (TBI), both of which could emerge after discharge from the military; and 3) veterans who were assigned a 100 percent disability rating by the VA or DOD yet have not applied for SSA's disability benefits, despite the fact that some of them are very likely to also meet SSA's eligibility criteria.

GAO recommended that the VA and SSA work together to address these serious gaps in outreach that negatively impact our most severely wounded warriors and their families. GAO stated that VA could take such actions as including information about SSA benefits in its phone outreach campaign to OEF/OIF veterans and providing VA medical centers and Veterans Benefits

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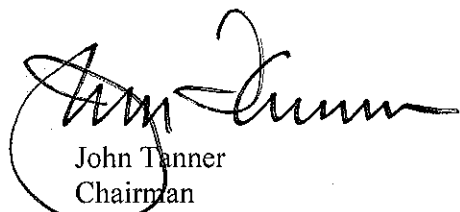
Administration regional offices with guidance for referring veterans to SSA, and SSA could work with VA to encourage stronger coordination between local SSA offices and VA medical facilities.

We were pleased to see that both SSA and VA concurred with GAO's recommendation to work together to improve outreach. We strongly urge you to act promptly on this recommendation, to prevent wounded warriors from forgoing benefits to which they may be entitled due to lack of information. We ask that you provide us with your plan for responding to this recommendation, including specific objectives and time frames.

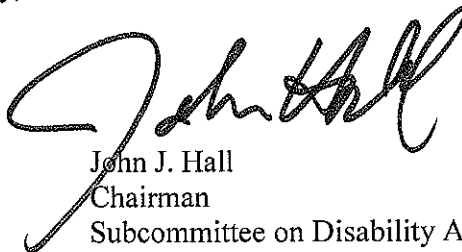
The GAO report also emphasized that the process of applying for SSA's disability benefits presents challenges for many wounded warriors. For example, GAO's survey of wounded warriors who had applied for these benefits showed that 49 percent reported difficulty in understanding SSA's benefit application, which is more targeted toward those with civilian work histories. These challenges are compounded by the prevalence of PTSD and TBI among wounded warriors. For these reasons, it is critical for SSA to ensure that when wounded warriors apply for disability benefits, they have access to personalized assistance — either in-person or on the telephone — from highly-trained staff experienced in taking applications from these individuals. We request that SSA provide us with an explanation of how the agency will better ensure that wounded warriors receive the individualized assistance they need to effectively file applications for disability benefits.

Again, we commend you on the success of your efforts to improve service delivery for wounded warriors who may be eligible for Social Security or SSI disability benefits, and look forward to working with you to ensure that they are fully informed about these benefits.

Sincerely,



John Tanner  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Social Security  
Committee on Ways and Means



John J. Hall  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance  
and Memorial Affairs  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs



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



Doug Lamborn  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance  
and Memorial Affairs  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs