Gov. Perry Announces Initiative to Reduce Federal Claims Backlog for Veterans

*Note - Gov. Perry frequently departs from prepared remarks.

Thursday, November 12, 2009

Thank you for being here this morning.

If the events at Fort Hood over the past week have taught us anything, it’s about the fragility of life and the importance of making the most of the time we’re allotted.

For entirely too many Texas veterans awaiting a response from the Department of Veterans Affairs time has not been on their side so we’re taking action to fix that.

One key contributor to the problem is a backlog of claims applications made to the VA.

The VA must make a decision on these claims before veterans can receive benefits like medical care from VA hospitals or disability compensation and before they can appeal some VA decisions.

This is a national issue, but Texas veterans are among the hardest hit with more than 39,000 applications pending in our state’s two regional VA offices.

I am disturbed by the fact that 41% of the claims at the Houston Regional Office have been pending for more than four months.

To veterans and their families, that could mean nearly half a year of untreated pain unpaid bills and unresolved anxiety about the future.

Our veterans who have fought bravely in faraway lands shouldn’t have to come home and do battle with a bureaucracy.

While this is a federal problem, Texas can no longer sit on the sidelines, vainly hoping things get better.

Therefore, I have directed the Texas Veterans
Commission to help our veterans cut through the red tape by reducing the burden on the VA with the creation of a Claims Processing Assistance Team funded by my office. Through this team, TVC counselors will streamline and hopefully accelerate the claims process by identifying applications that are complete and ready for expedited review by the VA and obtaining missing evidence when necessary.

By making sure claims are properly prepared and applications complete this team will not only reduce the likelihood of applicants enduring the lengthy appeals process it will also minimize need for a protracted hearing.

This team can also cut red tape by identifying lower priority, but time-consuming, claims for expedited handling.

By presenting claims that are more accurate and complete, this team will make the VA’s job much easier and cut down on the time needed to do it.

This is not entirely new ground. The Texas Veterans Commission has already helped reduce delays associated with VA paperwork.

While working with the VA on a pilot program last year, the TVC slashed claims processing time by an average of 120 days per case.

Their innovative approaches are now being touted as “best practices” at VA Regional Offices nationwide.

While they work, all TVC employees will remain under state control and their team will require minimal VA involvement although we will be counting on the VA’s cooperation to make this process work.

In a spirit of cooperative support for our veterans we hope the VA will provide our team work space at the Houston regional office and timely action on the work it performs.

To get this program up and running through the 2010 fiscal year, my office is providing a grant of nearly $400,000. These funds will also allow the TVC to hire up to 12 new full-time employees.

This is money well-spent because it helps Texas and the United States fulfill our moral duty to our service members by ensuring they receive their benefits in a timely manner.

It’s the least we can do for the people who have risked so much to defend our freedom.

Now, I would like to introduce Brigadier General Karen Rankin, Chair, Texas Veterans Commission, to discuss this effort. General?

[RANKIN SPEAKS]

Thank you, General, and thank you for your ongoing leadership of our efforts to properly care for our veterans.

Now, I would like to introduce a friend to Texas veterans who has been a vocal advocate for a solution, Senator Dan Patrick. Senator?

[PATRICK SPEAKS]

Thank you, Senator.

I also want to thank our hosts here at American Legion Post 490 for your hospitality and for your own efforts to support our veterans.

Now we’d be happy to take questions on these initiatives from our friends in the working press here today.