

By Steven Mayer October 26, 2011

Some local veterans swear they wouldn't be alive today if it weren't for the health care they receive from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Others say dealing with the VA is like walking through molasses. You may someday reach your destination -- if you live that long.

Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Bakersfield, has been dealing with complaints about the VA from constituents for years. So this week, he and a bipartisan group of congressional colleagues are demanding an independent investigation to find out once and for all what's ailing the VA and what can be done to cure it.

"I'm tired of putting a Band-Aid on it," McCarthy said Wednesday. To that end, he and more than two dozen members of both parties, including Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, signed a letter asking the U.S. Government Accountability Office to begin an inquiry into why veterans commonly experience long delays in the processing of their benefits.

Many also experience difficulty in scheduling and attending medical appointments in the VA's Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System, of which Bakersfield is a part. According to the VA's own numbers, disability claims take an average of 236 days to process. That's simply unacceptable, McCarthy said. "This is a structural problem. This is not just someone slipping through the cracks," he said. And the problems are not new.

Chuck Bikakis, director of Kern County Veterans Service, said in his 14 years of assisting veterans in Kern County, it has always been thus. One of the central problems boils down to one simple fact: The VA is being asked to serve more veterans with fewer dollars. He's seen the same trend locally. "Rather than call on the GAO to ask the VA what the problem is, just ask the VA. They'll be happy to tell you," Bikakis said.

In the early 1970s, about 7,000 employees in the VA's greater Los Angeles system were caring for about 50,000 veterans. Today, according to VA statistics, about 5,000 employees are caring for more than 82,000 veterans. It's a mathematical calculation that leaves many veterans waiting for months to get critical questions answered.

Mike Cortez, 63, an Army veteran who saw combat in Vietnam in 1967 and 1968, says the VA is just another arm of the octopus. "Since the day I first put on a uniform, it's always has been, 'Hurry up and wait,'" he said. "From right off the get. "You learn right away you're going to wait in line," he said. "It may take awhile, but you can't step out or you'll lose your place." Cortez said he lied to himself for more than 35 years about his Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, an illness that would send him flashing back to Vietnam in a split-second. It could be triggered by something as simple as an exploding firecracker on the 4th of July. He's not sure a GAO study will make a lasting difference, but he's happy to know someone cares enough to try. "I'm glad someone out there is screaming and yelling about these long waits at the VA," he said of the efforts by members of Congress.

Pat Pacana, wife of Vietnam veteran Frank Pacana, said the VA certainly has room for improvement, especially in the area of claims processing. But she and her 73-year-old husband are generally pleased with the service they receive from the VA. "I'm one of the happy ones," said Mrs. Pacana.

Besides suffering from PTSD, Frank has undergone quadruple heart bypass surgery and suffers from diabetes and glaucoma. "Without the VA, we'd probably be homeless right now," Mrs. Pacana said. The VA covers the full cost of Frank's meds. They have little trouble getting appointments with a doctor and the service is excellent, she said. "They call you about two weeks before your appointment," she said. "They send you a notice and they call you the day before. "We just thank God we have that coverage."

Larry Fillipo, a spokesman for VA's Veteran Benefits Administration in Los Angeles, said they have received and reviewed the congressional letter, but until the GAO takes action, he said he cannot comment on it. In the meantime, he said, the Veteran Benefits Administration is already headed for a significant "transformation." In 2012, all records will be changed to an electronic format, he said. Whether the new technology will streamline the processing of claims remains to be seen.