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THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON

October 19, 2009

The Honorable Daniel K. Akaka
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This is in response to your letter in which you suggest the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) explore the development and maintenance of a searchable electronic database to assist decision makers with obtaining evidence in support of Veterans' disability claims. Specifically, a database that provides verification of the location and timeframe of a Veteran's military service may yield credible evidence of a posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) stressor or allow for a presumption of exposure to herbicide agents.

We agree that a searchable database containing the specific locations, timeframes, and circumstances of a Veteran's military service would be helpful to VA decision makers. We are working with the Department of Defense as part of the Veteran's Lifetime Electronic Record (VLER) initiative to improve the manner in which this information is captured in each Servicemember's personnel file and is accessed by VA claims processing personnel. Additionally, we added a PTSD stressor verification site to our Compensation and Pension (C&P) Service Intranet webpage for VA regional office use. Although the site does not have a search engine, it contains more than 2,000 declassified military documents that have provided credible evidence in support of stressor statements from Veterans in many PTSD claims.

Further, VA is initiating a plan to assist regional office claims processing personnel in identifying ships that traveled on Vietnam's inland waterways or docked along the coast of Vietnam. This information is relevant for the purpose of establishing qualifying Vietnam service for the presumption of exposure to Agent Orange. If a Veteran was on a ship that traveled on the inland waterways or went ashore while the ship was docked along the shore of Vietnam, then exposure is accepted without further development. The C&P Service will compile official documents and organize a list of these Navy ships along with the dates of inland waterway travel or docking. The list will be made available electronically for nationwide use so that regional offices need not duplicate research efforts regarding ship movements within the Vietnam area of operations.

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The Honorable Daniel K. Akaka

These efforts are our initial steps toward our goal of a more comprehensive and searchable database.

Sincerely,



Eric K. Shinseki