

Prepared Statement

of

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REGARDING

THE INTEGRATED DISABILITY EVALUATION SYSTEM

BEFORE THE

HOUSE VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE

December 13, 2017

Opening Remarks

Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Esty, distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Integrated Disability Evaluation System, also known as the IDES.

The IDES is a joint Department of Defense (DoD) and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) program that achieves two primary DoD objectives: (1) ensuring the readiness of our military forces, and (2) providing timely, quality disability evaluation of wounded, ill, or injured Service members so we can assess their fitness-for-duty and, if unfit, the appropriate disability disposition and compensation.

Improved IDES Performance

The IDES is a success story that reflects the two Departments' shared commitment to collaboratively improve the evaluation of Service members transitioning to Veteran status due to disability. Since DoD's last appearance before this subcommittee to discuss the IDES, the Department has continued to improve the efficiency and quality of the disability evaluation process.

Since 2014, improved processing of nearly 22,000 physically unfit Service members per year has allowed the Military Departments to significantly reduce the amount of time Service members spend in a permanent non-deployable status and direct their resources towards accessing, training, and equipping physically ready forces.

The IDES also provides improved case management and transparency for Service members undergoing evaluation due to disability. Within the IDES, there is a single point of contact for providing information to the Service member or their representative, as applicable, about the DES process. The IDES also provides a more transparent disability evaluation process by allowing Service members to receive their proposed VA disability ratings and compensation at the same time they receive their DoD physically unfit determination. This allows the member to make an informed decision about the best course of action, which is a great help to Service members who have their military career unexpectedly ended by a disabling condition.

Today, Active Component (AC) IDES cases average 258 days from the date of referral to notification of VA disability benefits, well within the 295-day goal. This represents a 23 percent improvement since Fiscal Year (FY) 2014 and an overall 52 percent improvement over the 540 days Service members averaged to complete the Departments' separate disability processes prior to the worldwide implementation of the IDES. Similarly, Reserve Component (RC) IDES cases achieved a 22 percent timeliness improvement since FY 2014.

DoD is responsible for four core IDES process steps: Referral, Medical Evaluation Board, Physical Evaluation Board, and Transition. We are outperforming the DoD core process stage goals required by DoD policy. For example, in October 2017, DoD Core Stage performance for AC disability evaluation was 104 days against a 105-day goal, while RC disability evaluation was 88 days against a 125-day goal.

Although exceeding IDES performance goals, DoD is analyzing opportunities to reduce these goals to improve the readiness of our military forces and allow Service members to more quickly transition to veteran status.

Improved IDES Efficiency

In 2014, DoD consolidated and revised its disability evaluation issuances to provide clear policy guidance on Military Department operation of their respective DES processes. To accomplish this goal, DoD combined thirteen previous disability evaluation issuances and directive-type memoranda. A revised DoD Instruction, supported by specific topics presented in three DoD Manuals, addresses each aspect of the disability evaluation system and set requirements for each Military Department's execution of disability evaluation activities. This effort was the first attempt to establish a DoD-wide group of consolidated disability evaluation policy and procedure issuances since the 1996 publication of a legacy DES directive and instruction. As a result, the Military Departments now operate with a much-improved, well-defined set of policy and process documents.

As directed by Congress in the FY2013 National Defense Authorization Act, the Department implemented the DES Quality Assurance Program (QAP) in 2014. The DES QAP enables DoD to evaluate the accuracy and consistency of Military Department disability

determinations, the degree to which Military Departments comply with DoD policy in their disability determinations, and the duty performance of Medical and Physical Evaluation Boards and Physical Evaluation Board Liaison Officers. DoD requires a minimum 80 percent score for quality assurance measures, and uses case reviews to help assess and monitor Military Departments' DES performance in those areas. DES QAP scores for FY 2017 reflect an accuracy rate of 94 percent, a consistency rate of 77 percent, and 80 percent for duty performance. Consistency scores fell under the 80% goal in FY 2017 due to a purposeful effort to increase the complexity of test case themes used to evaluate Military Departments' consistent application of DoD policy. DoD increased the number of conditions for each test case, as well as the complexity of conditions presented. This added rigor in DoD's evaluation methodology identifies deficient areas so that the Military Departments ensure equitable and consistent application of DoD policy.

Training remains vital to the continued success of the IDES. DoD issued, in collaboration with the Military Departments, training standards and performance objectives (TSPOs) to ensure all IDES staff are prepared to provide Service members with the critical assistance on which they depend. Collectively, these efforts ensure that disability evaluation personnel are prepared to provide final adjudicative decisions accurately and in compliance with law and DoD policy.

Service Member Satisfaction

DoD remains committed to continuously evaluating the IDES to enhance the experience of wounded, ill, and injured Service members as they undergo this process. Constant oversight is critical to identify needed IDES improvements, monitor implementation, and measure Military Department performance. As such, DoD surveys Service members at the end of both the Medical Evaluation Board and Physical Evaluation Board phases of the IDES process, assessing their satisfaction with DoD and VA personnel and their overall IDES experience. Survey results taken from over 9,000 Service members from April to September 2017 indicate 93 percent of Service members were satisfied with their IDES experience. DoD will continue to utilize survey information and data to identify improvements.

Conclusion

DoD is committed to the IDES process and identifying potential improvements to the program. Moving forward, we will maintain our close collaboration with the VA to meet our shared goals of providing quality and timely integrated disability evaluations of America's wounded, ill, and injured Service members.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Esty, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, I thank you for your unwavering support of the brave men and women that serve our nation, and your dedication to ensuring we have the most efficient systems in place to meet their evaluation and transition needs.