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The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) Local 520
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US Representative District 7 Tom Rice, Fax: (843) 679-9783

Governor Nikki R. Haley, Fax: 803.734.5167

Dear SC Congressional Delegation and Governor Haley:

As the representatives of the Citizens of South Carolina, we believe that you are concerned about the issues that affect the Veterans of South Carolina.

The Veterans of South Carolina are facing a crisis when they oppose a decision made by the Columbia Veterans Affairs Regional Office (VARO). The disagreements of claims pending in South Carolina have climbed 50.28% since March 4, 2013, the second highest increase in the Nation of Veterans Affairs Regional Offices with 10,000 or more appeals pending. We know that you would agree the Veterans of South Carolina deserve better and this is unacceptable and needs immediate attention.

We have prepared an Appeals Issues and Resolutions Report and have included an executive summary for your review.

We would be more than willing to meet with you to discuss the details of this report so that our Veterans can be provided the service they have earned by serving our Nation.

We have also included our point of contact information as well.

We are looking forward to hearing from you on this most urgent matter.



Peter Shvetz
President



**The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) Local 520
PO Box 1778
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**Veterans Affairs Regional Office (VARO) Columbia
Appeals Issues and Resolutions**

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Executive Summary

AFGE Local 520 and VARO Columbia employees have always been and remain committed to serving veterans. However, the number of appeals at VARO Columbia have climbed from 6,306, March 4, 2013 to 12,684, November 30, 2015, as of the VBA's Monday Morning Workload Report (MMWR), respectively.

The local solution to the problem was to publish a three page document (one page and a paragraph if the charts are removed) named *"Appeals Staffing Increase Plan FY 2015"* and to make a workload management report called Columbia Appeals Workload (CAW) that has only exacerbated the problems.

The appeals process consists of many "spokes in the appeals wheel" and instructions for handling them and must be streamlined to avoid duplication, a drain on human resources, and allow for the timely promulgation of local appeals rating decisions and BVA grants, and the expeditious handling of Remands as required by law.

Therefore, proper staffing and training, a healthy workplace culture that promotes productivity and high morale, and effective leadership are paramount in order to serve Veterans who find themselves in what they call the "hamster wheel" and to provide employees with the tools necessary to serve them effectively and efficiently.

"In 2001, VBA established the de novo review that allows a DRO to reverse VA's initial denial, completely or in part, without needing any new or additional documentation from the veteran, or based upon new evidence..." *Audit of VA Regional Office's Appeals Management Processes, May 30, 2012 10-03166-75*

The VBA's De Novo Program was a VBA initiative to help reduce the appeals inventory. Unfortunately for the Veterans of South Carolina, the VARO 319 De Novo program is in a "Tsunami" with no sign of abatement because of the pending 5002 De Novo reviews, 4966 traditional disagreements, 1790 perfected appeals, 909 BVA and CAVC Remands with over a third with no action taken, and 987 local hearings and only 10 DROs and 4 with less than 4 months experience to process them. Furthermore, nearly half of the employees assigned to the appeals team are inexperienced and untrained in appeals processing.

Local and national leadership are in a state of paralysis on this issue. Local management says their hands are bound as to granting overtime for the appeals workload. Moreover, local management also lacks the experience to effectively address the problems and their engagement with labor and experienced appeals employees has proven to be "faux" at best. The national solution of legislative change is not in the foreseeable future. Veterans need help now!

AFGE Local 520 has addressed the appeals problem with the Director during weekly meetings, at Labor Management Forums, and numerous letters to the VA Chain of Command spanning nearly a decade and Members of the US House and Senate VA Committees for over 2 years.

Peter Shvets
President

