



THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON

October 4, 2005

The Honorable Lane Evans
Ranking Democratic Member
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Evans:

I am writing in response to your September 7, 2005, letter urging expedited Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) assistance to low-income veterans and survivors affected by Hurricane Katrina. I assure you that VA is doing everything possible to care for needy and disabled veterans and their dependents and survivors who are suffering from this disaster.

VA is reaching out to victims of Hurricane Katrina throughout the affected Gulf Coast region. In the first three weeks immediately following the Hurricane, we visited 82 shelters housing evacuees. We offered counseling on the availability of VA benefits and we explained procedures to ensure continuity of existing benefits. During these visits VA addressed immediate financial needs. We issued over 1,600 replacement checks to displaced beneficiaries totaling in excess of \$1.4 million. We have assisted over 3,000 veterans or beneficiaries in person and we have answered almost 13,000 telephone calls.

In your letter, you requested that VA conduct outreach at Hurricane Katrina evacuation shelters to identify pension-eligible individuals and to expedite payment of benefits to those individuals. Specifically, you recommended temporary implementation of a simplified application process, relaxed proof requirements, and centralized processing of pension claims filed by eligible elderly veterans and surviving spouses. VA has implemented each of these measures.

Under temporary emergency relief procedures, teams of VA employees working at outreach sites will conduct pension-eligibility screening for veterans and surviving spouses to quickly elicit information concerning income, net worth, age, wartime service, character of discharge, marital status and receipt of disability benefits from the Social Security Administration. Team members will use this information to make an initial, on-site determination concerning claimants' basic eligibility for pension under the programs that Congress has established for wartime veterans who are age 65 or over or have been determined disabled for Social Security purposes, and certain surviving spouses of wartime veterans. We believe that assisting claimants in completing the currently approved forms will be more efficient than introducing a new and unfamiliar screening form into the system.

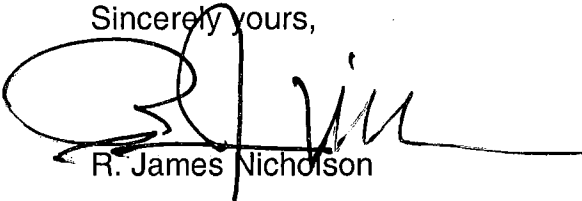
Page 2.

Honorable Lane Evans

Using the completed claim forms and information obtainable through remote access to VA's computer systems, team members can rapidly confirm pension eligibility in most of these cases. In those cases where entitlement is immediately established, an outreach team member will calculate the amount of the initial pension payment and issue a check in that amount as an advance payment. The applications will then be delivered to the appropriate regional office for expeditious processing. Because the New Orleans Regional Office is not currently operational, pension applications from Louisiana claimants will be processed by the Milwaukee Pension Maintenance Center. Applications from Hurricane Katrina victims submitted at other locations such as Vet Centers, VA medical centers, VA regional offices, or any veterans service organization office will also be expedited.

I appreciate your concern and your support of our efforts to ensure that victims of Hurricane Katrina receive all of the benefits that VA has to offer during this difficult time.

Sincerely yours,



R. James Nicholson