

Backlog of Disability Claims for Veterans Sends Democrat on a Tear

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Last week, the House Veterans Affairs Committee held one a hearing on the backlog of disability compensation claim spending before the Department of Veterans' Affairs. The usual polite questioning of VA officials turned contentious, not because of the Republican majority, but thanks to the ranking Democrat on the panel, Representative Bob Filner of California.

The vice chairman, Representative Gus Bilirakis, a Republican of Florida, called on the V.A. "to break this cycle of unproductively and deliver the benefits that V.A. was created to provide," Mr. Filner, interjected, "Well, here we are again."

By Mr. Filner's recollection of his first hearing of this type he noted with rising irritation that the V.A. has hired, by his count, more than 10,000 new employees in recent years, but has seen the backlog more than double, to over 900,000 pending claims. Mr. Filner believes the Veterans Benefits Administration, the division that handles disability compensation, had done nothing more than "recycle programs."

"The definition of insanity is to try the same thing over and over again and expect different results," he said, sounding a theme he would return to several times during the nearly five-hour hearing.

The congressman, who is currently running for mayor of San Diego was just warming up. After a panel of experts from four major veteran service organizations, including the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars, testified about V.B.A.'s problems, Mr. Filner tore into them, too. And people started to notice.

Filner accused the groups of "playing" the V.A.'s and prodded the groups to support "radical" change and "blow up" or "break" what he called "this stupid system."

"What are you afraid of?" he repeatedly asked.

Gerald Manar, deputy director of National Veterans Service for the V.F.W., politely responded for the group: "Sir, when you blow up something, you have nothing left."

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