

115TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

S. 933

To direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out a pilot program to provide veterans the option of using an alternative appeals process to more quickly determine claims for disability compensation, and for other purposes.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

APRIL 25, 2017

Mr. SULLIVAN (for himself and Mr. CASEY) introduced the following bill;
which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs

A BILL

To direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out a pilot program to provide veterans the option of using an alternative appeals process to more quickly determine claims for disability compensation, and for other purposes.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Express Appeals Act
5 of 2017”.

1 **SEC. 2. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS PILOT PRO-**
2 **GRAM ON FULLY DEVELOPED APPEALS.**

3 (a) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary of Veterans Affairs
4 shall carry out a pilot program to provide the option of
5 an alternative appeals process that shall more quickly de-
6 termine such appeals in accordance with this section.

7 (b) ELECTION.—

8 (1) FILING.—In accordance with paragraph
9 (2), a claimant may elect to file a fully developed ap-
10 peal under the pilot program under subsection (a) by
11 filing with the Secretary the following:

12 (A) The notice of disagreement under
13 chapter 71 of title 38, United States Code,
14 along with the written election of the claimant
15 to have the appeal determined under the pilot
16 program.

17 (B) All evidence that the claimant believes
18 is needed for the appeal as of the date of the
19 filing.

20 (C) A statement of the argument in sup-
21 port of the claim, if any.

22 (2) TIMING.—A claimant shall make an election
23 under paragraph (1) as part of the notice of dis-
24 agreement filed by the claimant in accordance with
25 paragraph (1)(A).

26 (3) REVERSION.—

1 (A) ELECTED REVERSION.—At any time, a
2 claimant who makes an election under para-
3 graph (1) may elect to revert to the standard
4 appeals process. Such a reversion shall be final.

5 (B) AUTOMATIC REVERSION.—A claimant
6 described in subparagraph (A), or a claimant
7 who makes an election under paragraph (1) but
8 is later determined to be ineligible for the pilot
9 program under subsection (a), shall revert to
10 the standard appeals process without any pen-
11 alty to the claimant other than the loss of the
12 docket number associated with the fully devel-
13 oped appeal.

14 (4) OUTREACH.—In providing claimants with
15 notices of the determination of a claim during the
16 period in which the pilot program under subsection
17 (a) is carried out, the Secretary shall conduct out-
18 reach as follows:

19 (A) The Secretary shall provide to the
20 claimant (and to the representative of record of
21 the claimant, if any) information regarding—

22 (i) the pilot program, including the
23 advantages and disadvantages of the pro-
24 gram;

1 (ii) how to make an election under
2 paragraph (1);

3 (iii) the limitation on the use of new
4 evidence described in paragraph (3) of sub-
5 section (c) and the development of infor-
6 mation under paragraph (4) of such sub-
7 section; and

8 (iv) the ability of the claimant to seek
9 advice and education regarding such proc-
10 ess from veterans service organizations, at-
11 torneys, and claims agents recognized
12 under chapter 59 of title 38, United States
13 Code.

14 (B) The Secretary shall collaborate, part-
15 ner with, and give weight to the advice of the
16 three veterans service organizations with the
17 most members to publish on the Internet
18 website of the Department of Veterans Affairs
19 an online tutorial explaining the advantages and
20 disadvantages of the pilot program.

21 (c) TREATMENT BY DEPARTMENT AND BOARD.—

22 (1) PROCESS.—Upon the election of a claimant
23 to file a fully developed appeal pursuant to sub-
24 section (b)(1), the Secretary shall—

1 (A) not provide the claimant with a state-
2 ment of the case nor require the claimant to file
3 a substantive appeal; and

4 (B) transfer jurisdiction over the fully de-
5 veloped appeal directly to the Board of Vet-
6 erans' Appeals.

7 (2) DOCKET.—

8 (A) IN GENERAL.—The Board of Veterans'
9 Appeals shall—

10 (i) maintain fully developed appeals
11 on a separate docket than standard ap-
12 peals;

13 (ii) decide fully developed appeals in
14 the order that the fully developed appeals
15 are received on the fully developed appeal
16 docket;

17 (iii) except as provided by subpara-
18 graph (B), decide not more than one fully
19 developed appeal for each four standard
20 appeals decided; and

21 (iv) to the extent practicable, decide
22 each fully developed appeal by the date
23 that is one year following the date on
24 which the claimant files the notice of dis-
25 agreement.

(B) ADJUSTMENT.—Beginning one year after the date on which the pilot program under subsection (a) commences, the Board may adjust the number of standard appeals decided for each fully developed appeal under subparagraph (A)(iii) if the Board determines that such adjustment is fair for both standard appeals and fully developed appeals.

(3) LIMITATION ON USE OF NEW EVIDENCE.—

(A) IN GENERAL.—Except as provided by subparagraphs (B) and (C)—

(i) a claimant may not submit or identify to the Board of Veterans' Appeals any new evidence relating to a fully developed appeal after filing such appeal unless the claimant reverts to the standard appeals process pursuant to subsection (b)(3); and

(ii) if a claimant submits or identifies any such new evidence, such submission or identification shall be deemed to be an election to make such a reversion pursuant to subsection (b)(3).

(B) EVIDENCE GATHERED BY BOARD.—

Subparagraph (A) shall not apply to evidence developed pursuant to paragraphs (4) and (5).

1 The Board shall consider such evidence in the
2 first instance without consideration by the Vet-
3 erans Benefits Administration.

4 (C) REPRESENTATIVE OF RECORD.—The
5 representative of record of a claimant for ap-
6 peals purposes, if any, shall be provided an op-
7 portunity to review the fully developed appeal of
8 the claimant and submit any additional argu-
9 ments or evidence that the representative deter-
10 mines necessary during a period specified by
11 the Board for purposes of this subparagraph.

12 (4) PROHIBITION ON REMAND FOR ADDITIONAL
13 DEVELOPMENT.—If the Board of Veterans' Appeals
14 determines that a fully developed appeal requires
15 Federal records, independent medical opinions, or
16 new medical examinations, the Board shall—

17 (A) in accordance with paragraph (5), take
18 such actions as may be necessary to develop
19 such records, opinions, or examinations in ac-
20 cordance with section 5103A of title 38, United
21 States Code;

22 (B) retain jurisdiction of the fully devel-
23 oped appeal without requiring a determination
24 by the Veterans Benefits Administration based
25 on such records, opinions, or examinations;

1 (C) ensure the claimant, and the represent-
2 ative of record of a claimant, if any, receives a
3 copy of such records, opinions, or examinations;
4 and

5 (D) provide the claimant a period of 90
6 days after the date of mailing such records,
7 opinions, or examinations during which the
8 claimant may provide the Board any additional
9 evidence without requiring the claimant to make
10 a reversion pursuant to subsection (b)(3).

11 (5) DEVELOPMENT UNIT.—

12 (A) ESTABLISHMENT.—The Board of Vet-
13 erans' Appeals shall establish an office to de-
14 velop Federal records, independent medical
15 opinions, and new medical examinations pursu-
16 ant to paragraph (4)(A) that the Board deter-
17 mines necessary to decide a fully developed ap-
18 peal.

19 (B) REQUIREMENTS.—The Secretary
20 shall—

21 (i) ensure that the Veterans Benefits
22 Administration cooperates with the Board
23 of Veterans' Appeals in carrying out sub-
24 paragraph (A); and

1 (ii) transfer employees of the Veterans
2 Benefits Administration who, prior to the
3 enactment of this Act, were responsible for
4 processing claims remanded by the Board
5 of Veterans' Appeals to positions within
6 the office of the Board established under
7 subparagraph (A) in a number the Sec-
8 retary determines sufficient to carry out
9 such subparagraph.

10 (6) HEARINGS.—Notwithstanding section 7107
11 of title 38, United States Code, the Secretary may
12 not provide hearings with respect to fully developed
13 appeals. If a claimant requests to hold a hearing
14 pursuant to such section 7107, such request shall be
15 deemed to be an election to revert to the standard
16 appeals process pursuant to subsection (b)(3).

17 (d) DURATION; APPLICATION.—The Secretary shall
18 carry out the pilot program under subsection (a) for a five-
19 year period beginning one year after the date of the enact-
20 ment of this Act. This section shall apply only to fully
21 developed appeals that are filed during such period.

22 (e) REPORTS.—During each year in which the pilot
23 program under subsection (a) is carried out, the Secretary
24 shall submit to the Committees on Veterans' Affairs of
25 the House of Representatives and the Senate a report on

1 the pilot program. The first such report shall be submitted
2 by not later than 180 days after the date on which the
3 pilot program commences. Each report shall include the
4 following:

5 (1) For the period covered by the report—

6 (A) the number of claimants who filed a
7 fully developed appeal under the pilot program;

8 (B) the average processing time for each
9 such appeal, measured by each phase of the ap-
10 peal, and, if the processing time for appeals ex-
11 ceed one year, the reasons for such processing
12 time;

13 (C) a summary of reasons for which the
14 development of evidence was required under
15 subsection (c)(5);

16 (D) the number of issues decided, listed by
17 the disposition of the issue;

18 (E) of the number identified in subpara-
19 graph (D), the number of issues for which evi-
20 dence was not so developed, listed by the dis-
21 position of the issue;

22 (F) of the number of fully developed ap-
23 peals decided by the Board of Veterans' Ap-
24 peals, the number of cases from each agency of

1 original jurisdiction, listed by the disposition of
2 the issue;

3 (G) the number of fully developed appeals
4 appealed to the Court of Appeals for Veterans
5 Claims, listed by the disposition of the case;

6 (H) the number of reversions made under
7 subsection (b)(3); and

8 (I) any reasons for why a claimant was de-
9 termined to be ineligible to participate in the
10 pilot program.

11 (2) A review, made in conjunction with veterans
12 service organizations, of the efforts of the Secretary
13 to provide clear rating decisions and improve dis-
14 ability rating notification letters, including with re-
15 spect to—

16 (A) the opinions of veterans service organi-
17 zations regarding such efforts; and

18 (B) how the pilot program improves such
19 efforts.

20 (3) A recommendation for any changes to im-
21 prove the pilot program.

22 (4) An assessment of the feasibility and advis-
23 ability of expanding the pilot program.

24 (f) REGULATIONS.—Not later than one day after the
25 date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary shall pub-

1 lish interim guidance on the pilot program under sub-
 2 section (a). Not later than 90 days after such date of en-
 3 actment, the Secretary shall prescribe regulations to carry
 4 out such pilot program.

5 (g) DEFINITIONS.—In this section:

6 (1) CLAIMANT.—The term “claimant” has the
 7 meaning given that term in section 5100 of title 38,
 8 United States Code.

9 (2) COMPENSATION.—The term “compensa-
 10 tion” has the meaning given that term in section
 11 101 of title 38, United States Code.

12 (3) FULLY DEVELOPED APPEAL.—The term
 13 “fully developed appeal” means an appeal of a claim
 14 for disability compensation that is—

15 (A) filed by a claimant in accordance with
 16 subsection (b)(1); and

17 (B) considered in accordance with this sec-
 18 tion.

19 (4) STANDARD APPEAL.—The term “standard
 20 appeal” means an appeal of a claim for disability
 21 compensation that is not a fully developed appeal.

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