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Joe Courtney  
Congress of the United States  
2nd District, Connecticut

October 2, 2008

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The Honorable James Peake  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Peake:

I write today to express my concern and disappointment with the Veterans Administration's failure to provide disabled veterans in Connecticut the forms they need to access their local tax benefits.

As you may know, for many years the VA automatically mailed disabled veterans "VA Form 20-5455," which is needed to prove service-related disabilities. This documentation is of critical importance to veterans with service-connected disabilities in my district and across Connecticut, where it is used to qualify them for annual property tax abatements. These forms were typically mailed in September so that veterans could use it to claim their exemption by October 1, the deadline for submission of tax abatement and exemption in the state.

However, late last month the VA notified state officials that a new computer payment processing system that came on-line over the summer would be unable to automatically issue this form – a capability of the old system that was inexplicably lost in the upgraded system. This late announcement raised serious and legitimate concerns from Veterans Service Organizations (VSO) and in the veterans' community that Connecticut's disabled veterans would be unable to receive the tax benefits they have earned for their service. Thankfully, we have since learned that under Connecticut law, disabled veterans have until March or April to claim their exemption and can even claim it retroactively if needed.

Although I am disappointed by this change in long-standing VA practice and the extremely short notice that the VA gave of its discontinuation, I am pleased that our state officials are actively working to get word out to our state's veterans about this change and the extended period in which they have to claim their tax exemption. However, like veterans and VSOs in my district, I remain very concerned that this change places the burden of securing this form on disabled veterans. This serves as an unnecessary requirement that could prevent some from taking advantage of the benefits they have unquestionably earned for their service to our nation, or serve as a disincentive to doing so.

**To this end, I ask that the VA take immediate steps to correct the deficiencies in the upgraded computer system that caused this problem and reinstate the practice of automatically sending veterans the documentation they need to prove their service-connected disabilities for the purposes of claiming state tax exemptions and other benefits.** Thank you for your urgent attention to this important matter and I look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,

JOE COURTNEY  
Member of Congress