WHAT ABOUT US?

If ever there was a modern-day manifestation of that old adage about "shoveling sand against the tide" it is the mess the U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs finds itself in as it tries to deal with mounting claims for disability benefits.

Too many veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have had to wait - some, a year or more, -to have their claims for disability benefits processed.

In July 2012, Allison Hickey, a retired Air Force general and the VA's Director of Benefits said, there were 565,000 veterans with pending disability claims, a state of affairs she said was "way to much".

In October 2012, the backlog of veteran disability claims had soared to 860,000 with 228,000 of them more than one year old. A VA spokesman at the time termed the delay "unacceptable".

Part of the problem is mushrooming claims from two simultaneous, 10 year wars involving 2.5 million Americans who have served in combat zones, one third of them on multiple deployments. The number of traumatic head injuries, amputations, PTSD cases and other serious wounds has overwhelmed the VA. Another reason for the backlog is the unbelievable way the VA is handling this deluge.

It is struggling with 4.4 million files, 80 percent of them paper records. VA Secretary Eric Shinseki, a retired Army general with a reputation for integrity, has promised to modernize his department by 2015, small consolation for those now stuck in line.

Close to half of returning service members are now filing claims for disability benefits. Not all are legitimate. For those who get turned down, there is an appeals process, but that, too, is slow, often taking two to three years.

A newly employed Veterans Benefits Management System is supposed to speed the VA toward its goal of being all electronic by 2015, but so far just 6,000 claims have been processed using the system. Once VSOs have trained personnel in place to assist vets with electronic filing, more rapid gains are expected.

"See, I told you everything would be allright. All we had to do was wait a while."