



## NOTES FROM VBA VSO NATIONAL SERVICE DIRECTORS MEETING – OCT. 9, 2019

*The call was facilitated by Michael Stoddard, VBA VSO Liaison, Under Secretary for Benefits. There was also an option to attend the meeting in person in Washington, D.C. This made transcription more difficult because we could not hear any questions that those people asked—only the answers from VA staff. Representing the NLSVCC were Caleb Stone from William & Mary and Stacey-Rae Simcox from Stetson.*

### **Mail Automation**

- After about twenty minutes of technical difficulties, people who had used the phone to dial into the meeting were imported into a presentation on mail automation, which was already in progress.
- The VA is currently working on a software solution that will automate VBA's mail intake process, which it holds will significantly reduce current processing times. After the VBA scans received documents into the mail portal, the software will automatically open the mail, analyze the content, take any necessary actions (like establish a claim or update an address), then upload the documents into VBMS. No timetable was given.

### **Blue Water Navy Update**

- The VA is finalizing a Blue Water Navy training letter and will thereafter make M21-1 changes. The VA is also updating the existing facts sheets regarding Agent Orange exposure. Additionally, the VA will send outreach letters – one for standard compensation claims from veterans, one for survivors. Both letters will have supplemental claim forms attached. The stated goal date was October 23.
- The VA is going to be entering into the petition for rulemaking stage “soon” to implement the statutes, but no specific timetable was forthcoming.
- The VA has employed a team from “records services” (possibly from the National Archives and Records Administration) to scan all of the relevant ships’ logs for coordinates. This project is to be completed by November 15. By the end of 2019, the VA is to plug these coordinates into its “Ship Locator Tool.”
- The VA representative asserted that the Ship Locator Tool would not be used as a final tool for a denial, but rather a quicker way of getting a grant. She stated that anything the Ship Locator Tool doesn't approve would be flagged for further development.
- The VA has received ~6,200 claims from Blue Water Navy Veterans and ~520 claims from survivors. There have been thousands of calls to the VA's call center.
- The VA is trying to work out issues like dependency and military retirement so it is “ready to roll” on January 1, 2020. The VA will not grant any claims before January 1, regardless of terminal illness or any other factors.
- At this point in the discussion, one of the male VA staffers interjected and said that VSOs should “send priority claims to [him]” – while it was unclear who spoke up, the most likely culprit was Mike Stoddard.



## Intent to File Forms

- Referencing past conflict with advocates, the VA will now apply ITFs to supplemental claims. It is unclear if this will be retroactive, and it is uncertain when this policy will take effect (if it hasn't already). The VA is trying to solve technical problems related to commingled claims.

## Contracted Compensation and Pension Examinations

- Staff from the VA Medical Disability Examination Program Office gave a PowerPoint presentation. MDEPO is in charge of C&P operations, acquisitions, quality control, training, and DBQ management. VES, QTC, and LHI are the major C&P providers (or vendors) in most areas, but VetFed replaces LHI in the Western United States.
- The VBA must route examination requests to VHA C&P clinics (~36% of examinations) until capacity is reached before routing to third-party contractors (~64% of examinations).
- 1,493,797 examinations were performed from October 2018 through August 31, 2019, and 4,767,984 Disability Benefits Questionnaires were completed.
- Notes from the PowerPoint on the examination scheduling process:
  - The vendor contacts the veteran via telephone within three business days of the exam request receipt date.
  - The confirmation letter must be sent by a method that ensures receipt by the veteran at least five days before the appointment date.
  - If unable to contact by telephone, the appointment information must be sent by a tracked method to ensure receipt by the veteran at least five days before the scheduled appointment (certified, UPS, FedEx).
  - The vendor must follow-up by telephone or electronic method 24 - 48 hours before the scheduled appointment.
  - The veteran has one opportunity to reschedule an appointment.
  - A veteran should call 1-800-827-1000 if unable to attend the scheduled appointment.
- The VA is about to change the process in the M21-1 by which the VA notifies the veteran that an examination will be rescheduled.
- The vendor is supposed to call the veteran by telephone to work out an agreeable time for scheduling the appointment (common practice is allegedly "three attempts" to call). If there is no contact, the vendor will blind schedule.
- The vendors are trying to get the VBA to allow notifications by email and text. The VA staffers expressed reluctance to allow this.
- No types of claims are excluded from third-party contractors, which is a departure from past practice.
- The VA says that doctors have to be licensed and can't be under investigation, but it doesn't otherwise interfere with the vendors' hiring process for C&P examiners.
- Veterans are sent thirteen-question surveys on contractor quality (the first twelve questions count), then the answers are plugged into a performance review database (the federal Contractor Performance Assessment Reporting System).
- VA staff promised to share these surveys with VSOs.



- MDEPO provided an email for questions, concerns, or issues with contract examinations: [Contractexam.vbavaco@va.gov](mailto:Contractexam.vbavaco@va.gov)
  - MDEPO staff noted that the email address wasn't to be made public. (Because of the NLSVCC's VSO status, there should be no problems with NLSVCC members using it.)
  - MDEPO staff stated that they've received 13K inquiries via this address and have had a ~95% response rate.

### **Stakeholder Enterprise Portal**

- The VA is having IT problems with representatives filing claims with SEP. ID.me was blamed. People using PIV Cards are not affected.

### **Hardcopy vs. digitized copies of decisions for POAs**

- The VA is looking into saving paper by digitizing decision letters and notifying representatives electronically. It seems like no one will be forced into this system yet.