



NOTES FROM VBA VSO NATIONAL SERVICE DIRECTORS MEETING – NOV. 14, 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. Caleb Stone from William & Mary represented the NLSVCC.

****EDITORIAL NOTE*** Frankly, there wasn't a lot of useful information on this call. A presentation about VASRD rulemaking was cut at the last minute.*

- **Duty To Assist Errors**
 - Higher Level Reviewers and Board of Veterans' Appeals are supposed to send Duty To Assist errors back to the lower level if found.
 - The VA catches some of these errors before an initial or supplemental claim decision is made
 - Each appellate option has different quality assurance teams. Stoddard stated that VBA has an agreement with the Board not to discuss Board matters without Board staff present.
 - VA claims it is exceeding 96% accuracy goal (96.3%). (Actual evidence supporting this assertion was not presented.)
 - Medical examination and opinion problems are by far the most common problem.
- **Duty To Assist Errors & Remediation Efforts**
 - The VA released new training on its Examination Management System in 2018, on medical examination requests in September 2019, and on preventing deferred decisions in August 2019.
 - Compensation Services also coordinated with the Board to release podcast-style training courses associated with remand trends and recent changes resulting from Court holdings:
 - VA 4489948, The References, Episode One: Mitchell Opinions in the Post-Sharp World, and
 - VA 4507185, The References, Episode Two: Lyles and the Pyramid(ing) of Doom.
 - *It does not seem like these podcasts are available for public consumption.*
- **VA Solid Start Program Presentation (with directors from Milwaukee and Waco ROs)**
 - As per Executive Order 13822 (January 9, 2018), the VA is going to have call center staff make outgoing calls for new veterans leaving service.
 - One call 90 days after discharge, a second after 180 days, and a third after a year
 - Three Program Goals
 - Improve actions to ensure all Transitioning Service Members (TSMs), regardless of service or status, are aware of and have access to mental health services.
 - Improve actions to ensure the needs of at-risk Veterans are identified and met.
 - Improve mental health and suicide prevention services for individuals that have been identified as needing care.
 - “Proactive outreach” will give veterans emails and SMS reminders to answer these calls
 - This program starts on December 2 and has no end date in sight. ~120 agents nationally will make these calls
 - The presenter will “probably” make the call scripts available.



- If a veteran returns a call, it will go to the agent who called the veteran first (if that agent is available).
- The VA will call seven times before giving up.
- The VA is aiming for a 15% success (answer) rate to start.
- Audience Question: “Just using simple math, if you said you have 5k to 7K separations a week, that means toward the end of the year you would be making 15k to 21k phone calls a week. Will you be staffed to handle that?”
 - The presenter admitted that the answer is no if the engagement rate is higher than expected, but that staff should be adequate with the expected engagement rate.
 - The inquirer pointed out that the VA would still need enough staff to make the calls in the first place. There was no counterpoint given.
- Many people on the call thought that veterans would expect phishing scams.
- **Form Updates**
 - Under AMA, both the Sep. 2015 and Sep. 2018 21-0958 NODs are acceptable to use until February 19, 2020. The VA will remove them from its website on that date.
 - The VA updated the 21-526EZ. The VA will accept the old March 2018 form until September 2020.
- **“Open Discussion”**
 - Some people on the call were disappointed that VBA raters still seem to feel that their authority to grant claims is limited in comparison to Board Judges.
 - Many expressed frustration that Board staff were not on the call to answer questions.
 - Stoddard said that the VBA might be open to having VSO directors meet with VBA staff regarding medical exam contractor issues.
 - Stoddard ended by talking about VA attempts to crack down on DirectExpress card fraud.