



## NOTES FROM VBA VSO NATIONAL SERVICE DIRECTORS MEETING – FEBRUARY 13, 2020

*The call was facilitated by Michael Stoddard, VBA VSO Liaison, Under Secretary for Benefits. Because Caleb Stone and Stacey-Rae Simcox were both unavailable, these notes were taken by Abigail Mitchell. Abigail is a third-year law student at William & Mary and a future member of the Navy JAG Corps.*

### **Blue Water Navy Update**

- There is an ongoing VBA effort to engage with stakeholders, claimants, and VSOs to educate about the BWN act. For claimants, there is outreach going on attempting to identify and contact potential claimants.
- As part of the outreach, there is concern that these claimants may be targets of fraud. The award potential on some of these claims is massive, especially for retroactive claimants, so the VA is sending out fraud warnings to potential and current claimants.
- The VA is conducting a review with a special focus on the quality of adjudications to ensure accurate and consistent claims processing. Additionally, a data report is in the works, and a public report is anticipated around the end of February or early March.
- The VA is still working on analyzing the pertinent deck logs. So far, the Navy ones are all gathered, and the VA is currently working on gathering Coast Guard vessels' information. For submarines, the VA is working with the Naval History Heritage Command to identify which ones would qualify.

### **Solid Start Program**

- The VA launched the Solid Start Program on December 2, 2020. The goal is to contact veterans at least three times in the year following their separation from service. The same counselor will call the veteran on all of the occasions and even if the veteran calls in himself (or herself), there will be a significant effort to get that veteran connected with the assigned counselor. In addition to the calls, the VA will also send email reminders before the calls and follow up summary emails after the call. During the call, the counselor will gather enough information to verify the veteran's identity, but besides that will not offer or ask for any personally identifiable information.
- The program intends to build a positive relationship between veterans and the VA. This will help ensure that veterans can get their claims started on the right foot and have access to their benefits as early as possible.
- The counselors will have some training in mental health and will be able to refer veterans to mental health providers as needed. There will also be a direct connection to the crisis line and a feedback loop for if a veteran is referred to the crisis line while on the call.
- The key to success in this program seems to be getting veterans to the point that they are comfortable taking the calls. When the program first started, the email reminders were not functioning yet. Once the VA implemented the reminder emails, the responsiveness from veterans significantly increased. The VA also suggests that veterans should save the program number in their phones so they won't miss future calls.



- VSOs are promoted in the Solid Start Program welcome packet. There is also more information on VSOs on the website, and there is also an optional one-hour module available that gives an overview of non-Federal resources available.
- There was a concern that the RO websites may not be up to date with certain VSO local contacts. To remedy this, the VSOs need to contact those ROs and get the information updated.
- There was some discussion about how and if VSOs can participate in the programming. The general answer seemed to be that VSOs can be present during programming and can talk to veterans during intermissions and breaks, but that they won't be featured individually in the programming.

### **Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E)**

- The VBA wants feedback on a possible 2022 update to proposed legislative changes to VR&E entitlement provisions, specifically to the requirement that a veteran must have an employment handicap. The question asked is whether “employment handicap” should be amended to reflect more inclusive and less offensive language.
- The people on the call made several suggestions and implored the VA to use language that has legally stood up in other regulations.

### **Open questioning**

- Stoddard confirmed that decisions have already been made on Blue Water Veteran cases. He advised the VSOs that the Blue Water Veteran adjudicators are not being overwhelmed at the moment. He once again stated that VSOs should contact him about any priority cases that he should funnel to the adjudicators.