



NOTES FROM VBA AND VETERAN LEADERS MEETING – MAY 14, 2020

The call was facilitated by Michael Stoddard, VBA VSO Liaison, Under Secretary for Benefits. Caleb Stone from William & Mary represented the NLSVCC.

- **Introduction (Mike Stoddard)**
 - The coronavirus mail processing topic was dropped from the agenda at the last minute because the VA needs more time to get clear answers as to what is happening.
 - The June meeting will be devoted entirely to Rating Decision Notifications, VBMS, and Mail Operations.
- **In-person C&P Exams (Beth Murphy & Mary Glenn)**
 - Again, VA halted in-person C&P Exams in early April.
 - To try and limit the number of cases that get put on hold, RO personnel have been encouraged to look at claims and see if Acceptable Clinical Evidence or telehealth would be acceptable or if an examination isn't necessary.
 - VAMCs have shifted most resources to its coronavirus response, so VA has shifted almost all C&P work to third-party contractors.
 - The VA will have to come out of in-person examination lockdown eventually, so there is a lot of planning going on as it regards the mechanics of what restarting will look like (PPE usage, drive-through services, cleaning protocols, etc. etc.)
 - The VA's plan is in "mid-concurrence" right now, whatever that means.
 - Beth Murphy said that the VA has seen all-time high levels of success in requesting medical records from other entities.
 - Murphy was confident that the technical platforms contractors are using for telehealth are sound.
 - Murphy asked that VSOs send anything "weird"—e.g. claims that the VA may have dropped during the transition period—through Mike Stoddard.
 - All claims where the VA can't get records or do necessary in-person exams will remain on hold for now.
 - Murphy praised VA's Blue Water Navy claims processing and the uploading of the coordinates from ships logs.
 - On May 5, 14K Blue Water Navy claims went beyond VA's 125-day goal.
 - The VBA has processed about one-third of its Blue Water Navy Claims since January 1.
 - The VBA has issued guidance to RO personnel to stop denials because of failures to report.
 - If a veteran has received one anyway, inform Mike Stoddard.
 - Murphy noted that the NPRC has a skeleton crew that is currently focusing on priority claims like terminal illness and advanced age.
 - She acknowledged that there are significant processing issues because of a lack of personnel right now.
 - Mary Glenn stated that ~55K virtual examinations have been done.
 - The VA is making sure that third-party contractors have plans for following the CDC guidelines when reopening, and it is soliciting ideas from them regarding safety.



- Glenn stated that the VA's plan to restart in-person exams has been submitted to senior leadership for approval.
- **Education Services (James Ruhlman)**
 - GI Bill Benefits Coronavirus Changes (PL 116-140)
 - The VA is allowed to continue work-study payments (at 25 hours per week) even if a worksite is shut down.
 - The VA can continue benefits (e.g., housing payments) for 28 days if a veteran's school program is shut down.
 - The VA can restore entitlement to education benefits if the clock runs out because a school shuts a program down or cancels classes without credit.
 - The VBA set up a special call line for survivors (e.g., Fry Scholarship, DEA) under the GI Bill Hotline number (888-GIBILL-1).
 - In March, the VA identified the University of Phoenix, Colorado Technical University, American InterContinental University, Bellevue University and Temple University as in violation of U.S. law which prohibits illegal "advertising, sales, or enrollment practices."
 - The VA has extended the deadline for schools to respond to allegations with disputing information or corrective actions.
 - VA will not take action until June 7.
 - The VetTech Program lets veterans take intensive computer programming classes.
 - It is a set fund, and it is going to run out of money later in the fiscal year because the program is popular.
 - Veterans will be allowed to finish programs in progress, but the program can't pay for new veterans until the next fiscal year.
- **Coronavirus Stimulus Payments**
 - Veterans receiving disability compensation will get coronavirus stimulus payments, even if they didn't file taxes or provide their information on the IRS's coronavirus website.
 - 396,000 vets have received stimulus payments because of the information that the VA provided to IRS.
 - The VA is still working on veterans with fiduciaries and veterans who live in foreign nations or overseas territories.
- **Open Discussion**
 - A VFW representative brought up that VSOs are not getting notifications for decisions that deny veterans for a failure to report for an examination, so it is therefore impossible to provide Mike Stoddard with everyone who received a denial on this basis.
 - Stoddard stressed that the June call will focus on this issue.
 - Another VSO noted that the VA isn't sending courtesy paper copies of notifications to VSOs.
 - Stoddard again stressed that the June call will focus on this issue.
 - Jim Marszalek from DAV stated that its Portland office is not receiving mail.
 - Stoddard again stressed that Coronavirus Mail Guidance is coming soon, but promised to look into it because it was a concrete issue.
 - Stoddard plugged the Under Secretary for Benefits's "Tele-Town Halls."
 - 385K veterans have attended at an average of ~30K veterans per session.



- Tomorrow's 4 PM EST meeting for Oklahomans, next Monday's is for Kentuckians, and Thursday's meeting is for Virginians.
- Current trends in these meetings:
 - Older veterans are asking a lot of survivors benefits questions.
 - Older veterans that dealt with the VA 20 years ago but haven't been back since.
 - A couple of veterans have called in crisis.
- Stoddard noted that veterans are being charged for benefits advice.
 - He said that it isn't illegal, as veterans can make these choices on their own, but he did say that he believes that people are misrepresenting what they can do for veterans.
 - He stated that VSOs need to make it clear how many free services exist because no veteran should have to pay \$4K upfront for advice.
- Stoddard stressed that specific concerns for identifiable veterans are helpful rather than general complaints.
- Stoddard said that VSOs need to ensure that veterans know their options and rights for suspending debt payments.
- Nothing has changed since original wet signature guidance Stoddard forwarded in April: typed signatures and digital signatures continue to be acceptable.