



NOTES FROM VBA VSO NATIONAL SERVICE DIRECTORS MEETING – APR. 9, 2020

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

• Introduction

- Fact sheets regarding C&P examinations and coronavirus-related relief were published before the meeting.

• Medical Examinations (Beth Murphy)

- The VA has been monitoring the trajectory of veterans refusing to attend examinations and the third-party vendors that were declining to provide services.
- As of last Friday, in-person exams through vendors are halted.
- The VHA has reassigned C&P physicians to coronavirus care, and the examinations scheduled for VAMCs have shifted to third-party contractors.
- The VA is employing alternative methods (Acceptable Clinical Evidence exams/virtual exams) more liberally.
- VBA expanded number of DBQs acceptable to complete via telehealth from 16 to 29.
 - There are 82 DBQs total.
 - *(Editorial note: Of course, none of them are public any more. We are going to bring this up to Stoddard.)*
- VBA is asking the vendors to go through their queues and identify examination requests that can be done virtually or with the ACE process.
 - VBA is allowing vendors to take care of only some of the issues claimed even other issues can't be processed remotely. In other words, if a veteran has five claims, and only two can be examined remotely, the VBA is asking the vendors to do what they can and hold the other claims in abeyance.
- The VBA continues to monitor the queues. If examinations are suspended or canceled, the VAROs SHOULD NOT deny.
 - Murphy stated that there will be mistakes. If there's terminal illness, for example, or if a veteran is still getting called to report to an examination, contact Stoddard to get some workarounds figured out.
- VA personnel is going to determine who's getting virtual exams. It doesn't sound like veterans or representatives can make a request that the VA will honor.

• Appeals Management/Deadlines (Brianna Ogilvie)

- The VA is using existing "good cause" language in the regulations to liberally grant extensions.
 - COVID-19 is considered "good cause."
 - *(Editorial note: It was never clear if vet actually has to have the coronavirus to receive an extension. Presumably not, but this wasn't explicit.)*
 - There are no specific form requirements to ask for an extension.
 - Veterans can call the 1-800-827-1000 number to ask for extension to submit evidence before any AMA deadlines.
 - For claims, however, everything needs to be in writing



- Veterans can submit paperwork late for:
 - Perfecting claims
 - ITFs (as stated on call)
 - Challenging adverse decisions
 - NODs
 - Substantive Appeals
 - SSOC responses
 - *Ogilvie is unsure if BDD claims covered*
- Debt collection policy has temporarily changed.
 - All *new* debt collection actions are now suspended.
 - Veterans can ask the Debt Management Center to suspend existing debt collection actions via phone call.
 - Collection will resume sometime after the national emergency declaration is over.
 - VA is going to put out mail on these changes so veterans don't panic.
 - VA is also putting out letters to VARO staff, scripts to call center staff, and working on FAQs to be distributed.
- All in-person VBA hearings suspended
 - VAROs are reaching out in individual cases and offering either informal conferences or formal hearing via Skype as alternatives.
 - Skype not an option at all stations yet.
 - It sounds like Skype is only operational in Waco and Columbia VAROs for now.
 - Skype hearings will be recorded, and a transcript will be created from the recording afterward.
 - Veterans are also allowed to wait until in-person hearings are resumed, if they prefer.
- **Pension & Fiduciary Issues (Ron Burke)**
 - Automation
 - *(Editorial note: Much of this conversation was difficult to follow because the speaker seemingly assumed that everyone had already been looped on previous happenings.)*
 - Pension automation planning started in 2019. There were 5 updates through year, and VA is already seeing efficiency gains.
 - 6,000 burial claims processed in FY 2018, 22,000 in FY2019, ~77% of FY2019 total already processed in FY 2020.
 - VA is trying to automate 90% of what PMCs currently do, and it started over the weekend with burial claims.
 - Have processed 150 service-connected burial claims automatically, and the VA found errors in 6.
 - The VA is focusing on burials now, and it will begin automating DIC claims that ready for decision (e.g. P&T for ten years, not whether a death is S/C) on April 24
 - Between May 1 and June 12, VA will start automating EP150 for income adjustments, dependency claims, and non service-connected burials.



- One VSO asked if alternate signatures are being accepted on VA Form 21-0972 to establish pension claims, as VSOs can't get into nursing homes for veteran signatures because of lockdowns. Burke wasn't sure of the answer.
 - *(Editorial note: Burke didn't focus on coronavirus issues at all even though that's what everyone else wanted to talk about.)*
- **Final Notes (Mike Stoddard)**
 - Stoddard changed the title of these meetings to VBA and Veteran Leaders Monthly Meeting.
 - Stoddard encourages VSOs to send one-off cases to him, and he stressed that VBA wants to ensure that no vets are penalized because of COVID-19 issues.