



NOTES FROM VBA AND VETERAN LEADERS MEETING – JULY 9, 2020

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

Mail Operations Update (Crystal Myung)

- This discussion is allegedly part two of a "seven-part" conversation that will be continued monthly (until next year).
- States that the VA has cut down nine days from normal mail processing times through mail automation.
- **Recap of 6/11 Mail Operation Discussion Themes (Andrea Lapinski)**
 - Change is difficult, trying to get rid of manual labor in favor of AI
 - This benefits Veterans through a simplified and faster process, higher quality of initial routing, and better outcomes.
 - Cannot be successful without VSOs, and ongoing support and collaboration is needed
- **Inform + Collaborate: How to File a Claim Online Comms Campaign (Michael Young)**
 - The goal of the campaign is to increase online claims submissions by accredited Veteran Representatives and Claimants.
 - Compared to faxes, electronic submissions are more secure, have better image quality, and ultimately are processed faster.
 - Direct Upload Expansion to ID.me
 - Direct Upload CAN be used to submit documents to BVA.
 - "Through the intake centers (which includes Direct Upload), we auto-route any submissions which contain a 10182 directly to BVA. If not a BVA-specific document, it may route to the Compensation Mail queues, but VBA will quickly (1-3 days or less) route it to BVA for processing."
 - Direct Upload is now available to all Veteran Representatives via AccessVA, and it will expand to claimants in the future.
 - Direct Upload and ID.me live training sessions are coming in August, and questions regarding Direct Upload can be sent to VCIP.VBACO@va.gov.
- **Collaborate: How VSOs can Support Automation for Faster Claims Processing (Michael Taylor)**
 - VBA has automatically processed over 370,000 mail packets to date.
 - Wants VSOs to use Direct Upload or Direct Submit, double-check form completion, and always use the latest forms (VBA will stop accepting old forms on 1/1/2021).
 - Other requested actions:
 - Until faxes go away, make sure flatbed scanners are as clean as possible.
 - Don't use acronyms; bots can interpret most things in the English language.
 - Print in block letters.
 - Leave spaces blank instead of using "N/A."
 - Don't use cover letters that just tell VA which form you're sending.
- **Collaborate: VA Form Update Input Needed (Kayce White)**
 - To support faster claims processing, VA forms will be updated to include additional instructions for online web portal contact.



- Example from VA Form 21-526EZ (Page 3):

4. WHERE TO SEND INFORMATION AND EVIDENCE

You may send your application and any evidence in support of your claim by using any of the following methods shown in the table below.

MAIL TO	ONLINE
Department of Veterans Affairs Evidence Intake Center PO Box 4444 Janesville, WI 53547-4444	VA.gov: www.va.gov Direct Upload via https://eauth.va.gov/accessva/ VBA Benefits API - Consult your local Claims Management software provider for more information

- Contact Information:
 - For Questions about Mail Automation Services - VBACO.MailAutomation@va.gov
 - For Questions about Help Accessing Online Submission Systems - VCIP.VBACO@va.gov
 - For Questions about VA Benefits Intake API - API@va.gov
- Questions
 - Veterans that submit outdated forms will be informed and given a chance to provide the proper form.
 - If they are not verifying signatures, is there a separate process to prevent potentially fraudulent claims to ensure that only accredited representatives are signing forms?
 - Yes, those reviews occur and will still happen at the VSR level. VBA doesn't take any actions with the bots that aren't subject to review by the VSR.
 - Some claims management systems will expand form sections (such as disabilities) if the space is insufficient for the amount of text which has been typed. Will these forms still be eligible for automation?
 - That absolutely can impact VBA's ability to read those documents. VBA has seen that and provided feedback to some of the vendors, such as VetaSpec and VetPro.
 - Stakeholder Enterprise Portal (SEP) may or may not go away – a small minority of VSOs use it – but discussions are going on, no decisions have been made, and it's outside of VBA's control.

VSO Notification Update (Paul Shute & Corey Hawthorne, Montgomery VARO Director)

- VBA will give VSOs the option to have electronic notice of decisions OR provide ONE single address per ENTIRE VSO for paper mail.
- It's clear that it's not an actual notification—e.g., an email to a specific account—instead, we're talking about the VBMS filters discussed last month.
 - People are still unhappy about this. VBA promises ongoing discussions.
- Will continue to use the physical address for mail on 21-22a for private attorneys.
- Don't have a lot of information right now regarding a timeline, if BVA will be able to send electronic notifications, or if paper notifications that went away during the coronavirus will be restored until electronic notifications are ready.

Appeals Management Office Name Change/VSignals Survey (Fred Somers)

- AMO is now the Office of Administrative Review (OAR).
- Surveys emailed to claimants starting July 8, 2020, after VA receives Higher-Level Review (HLR) or Supplemental Claim, and it focuses on the filing process.



- An additional survey is sent when HLR or Supplemental Claim is *completed*, and it specifically focuses on the decision review process.
- OAR and Compensation Service will utilize results for program improvements.

Other Updates (Mike Stoddard)

- C&P Examinations
 - All 50 states have started in-person exams, though not all locations are open.
 - 80% of locations for IDES and BDD claims open.
 - Last week, 15,000 C&P Examinations were performed.
 - More data: <https://benefits.va.gov/compensation/claimexam.asp>.
- V&RE Name Change
 - Now Veteran Readiness and Employment – rehab had a negative connotation.
- Regarding the AMO name change - Appeals now belong to the Board, and the VBA is out of the appeals business except for legacy claims.
 - BVA VSO Liaison Martin Caraway- martin.caraway@va.gov

NOTES FROM BVA HEARING MANAGEMENT BRANCH'S "VSO HUDDLE" – JUNE 18, 2020

The call was facilitated by Dave Dunphy, Hearing Management Branch Chief at VA Board of Veterans' Appeals. Caleb Stone from William & Mary represented the NLSVCC.

- **Introduction (Dave Dunphy, david.dunphy@va.gov)**
- **Hearing Management Branch Personnel Updates**
 - Hearing Management Branch Task Organization has gone from 17 to 51 people since January.
- **Coronavirus Update**
 - VTC Video hearings at VAROs are "realigned" through July 31 and may extend into August based on VARO reopening.
 - "Realigned" means not happening.
 - Travel Board hearings "realigned" through Sept. 30th.
 - Central Office Hearings: (tentatively) starting July 13, three options:
 - Convert to virtual hearing (strongly preferred)
 - Dunphy noted that 30% of steady-state hearings were accomplished last week (around 200 hearings).
 - Postpone the hearing.
 - Attend in person at 425 I. Street (least preferred).
 - While vets who postpone will reenter queue based on case order number, but most rescheduled hearings will occur in FY21 (October 2020 or later).
 - There isn't good intel on the issue, but these BVA folks expect that most VAROs will remain closed to the public through mid-July (at least).
- **Virtual Hearings**
 - Veterans and advocates with another type of hearing can opt for a virtual hearing as late as 72 hours in advance (though earlier is better).
 - Program emails links through care.va.gov.



- This isn't a fast track—if you're not currently scheduled for a hearing, this process won't apply.
- Salvador Ambriz (salvador.ambriz@va.gov):
 - Converting to a virtual hearing doesn't move the appeals spot in the scheduling queue according to the docket date or the scheduled hearing date.
 - Once the hearing is held, the transcript is sent to a contractor for transcription. The contractor has 15 days to return the completed transcript for a standard work order and 5 days for AOD work orders.
 - Ambriz seems to be the contact for setting up an already-scheduled hearing to go virtual.
- **Blackout Date Tracker**
 - BVA is working on tracking blackout dates for VSOs on Caseflow—eventually planning to automate the process, but BVA employees are currently handling this task manually
- **VSO Liaison/AMO Comments (Marty Caraway from BVA and Monica Thomas from AMO)**
 - Marty Caraway from BVA (martin.caraway@va.gov)
 - Do not have a date for reopening 425 I Street Central Office, did not anticipate it being in June.
 - Over 1,600 hearings so far, and that's a massive step forward, but coronavirus put BVA ~9,000 hearings behind, very concerned about impending backlog that will be much worse if a lot of people don't opt into virtual hearings.
 - AMO (Monica Thomas)
 - ROs are holding informal conferences in lieu of hearings or Skype hearings.
 - Contact AMO-Appeals.Ops@va.gov.
 - Skype hearings allowed for predetermination hearings based on recent guidance (though Thomas noted that it isn't AMO's business).
 - Transcripts are taking one week to turn around because not as many veterans opting for Skype hearings.
- **Open Discussion**
 - A NJ VSO spoke very highly about the Skype predetermination hearing process and noted he was averaging 30 of them a month.
 - Judges are broadcasting from their houses in many cases. Someone relayed a story in which the judge, veteran, and VSO all had dogs present off-camera.