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Inside This Issue

2 VBA TACKLES VETERANS HOMELESSNESS

★★★★

3 WARRIORS TO WORK PILOT PROGRAM

★★★★

4 MORE EFFICIENT CLAIMS PROCESSING

★★★★



VA EXPANDS DBQS TO SUPPORT FASTER CLAIMS PROCESSING

The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) is making the same forms that VA medical providers use for claims evaluation available to the public, so that a Veteran's own doctor can evaluate and record a medical condition to support a claim.

The forms, called Disability Benefits Questionnaires (DBQ) cover a wide range of medical conditions, and use standard terms and check boxes to gather information about a medical condition so VBA's rating specialists can make a consistent and accurate disability ratings. By making these forms publicly available, VBA is giving Veterans the option of using a DBQ to get an evaluation for a disability with their local provider, at their own convenience, without having to schedule an appointment with VA.

"Our goal is a streamlined, user-friendly process," said Director of Compensation Service Tom Murphy. "The checkboxes in the DBQs allow for our claims to be processed with speed and efficiency and give private physicians an accessible method of providing evidence."

VBA has established a website,

<http://benefits.va.gov/disabilityexams>, which lists 71 DBQs by symptom and by form name. Veterans can search the list for the symptom that most accurately reflects the claimed disability, click on the link to open an Adobe Acrobat (.pdf) form, print it off, and take it to their private physician to use in assessing the condition. The Veteran or the doctor then submits the completed DBQ as medical evidence by mail or fax to the VBA Regional Office that handles the Veteran's claim. The website also has instructions for DBQ completion and "frequently asked questions" to help guide the Veteran and the doctor through the process.

While Veterans are always entitled to a compensation examination at no charge when requested by VBA, the Veteran is responsible for any co-pay or costs associated with seeking a private evaluation. DBQs must be filled out completely by the private physician in order to properly rate the disability. If the DBQ information is incomplete, VA may have to schedule the Veteran for a VA compensation examination.

One benefit of DBQs is they can be completed in conjunction with a Veteran's regular medical appointment with a private doctor. Many of the DBQs can be completed relatively quickly, in 15 to 60 minutes depending on the complexity of the forms and the conditions they cover. Each DBQ's estimated completion time is listed on the form.

Another key benefit is that use of DBQs helps accomplish VBA's goal for fully developed claims (FDC) upon initial submission. VBA developed the FDC program, with its new simplified claim forms, to help Veterans identify and gather all the supporting documentation needed for VA successfully to and quickly process a claim.

"When VBA's raters have all the information needed with a claim submission. Veterans start receiving their compensation decisions more quickly and accurately," Murphy said.

More information about the FDC program can be found at www.vba.va.gov/fastclaims.

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VBA TACKLES VETERANS HOMELESSNESS ON MULTIPLE FRONTS

The Department of Veterans Affairs' "no wrong door" philosophy to eliminate Veterans Homelessness ensures any Veteran who is homeless or at risk of becoming homeless will have timely access to appropriate programs and services.

Marcus Paige, an Iraq War Veteran, said his experience with the Wichita Regional Office (RO) is an example of how a life can change when there is no wrong door.

"When I got back from Iraq it seemed like all of my friends turned their back on me," Mr. Paige said. "They said I'd changed. I tried to hang on, working different jobs so I could be near my boys, but it was hard."

Mr. Paige returned from Iraq in 2005 and managed to "hang on" for five years, but in 2010 things became worse.

"I didn't think I could go on," he said. "I still kept in contact with my battle buddies, but they don't live near me. They were my life line, they told me to call the VA, and I finally did."

Family and friends are critical partners in directing Veterans to help. Unfortunately, the social isolation described by Paige sometimes makes it more difficult to find assistance. In addition, it is a risk factor for

homelessness. Ninety-two percent of homeless Veterans receiving VA services are male with most being single. Women, at 8 percent, are a rapidly growing segment of the homeless population, but unlike their male counterparts, 28 percent of them are housed with children. As a result of a diverse Veteran population, each case is different.

Every RO has a Homeless Veterans Outreach Coordinator responsible for case management and expedited processing of homeless Veterans' claims. In addition to expediting the process, the "no wrong door" philosophy maximizes resources by making referral to state, local and community partners.

The philosophy is built upon six strategies: Outreach/Education, Treatment, Prevention, Housing/ Supportive Services, Income/ Employment/Benefits and Community Partnerships. These six strategies encompass a wide continuum of interventions and services to end homelessness among Veterans

In the case of Mr. Paige, the Wichita RO's homeless coordinator worked closely with him to both expedite his claim and also ensure he was able to access other assistance he needed. In fiscal year 2011, the Veteran Benefits Administration was able to complete 11,197 claims for homeless Veterans in an average of 115 days.

"I'm feeling and looking better as a man," said Mr. Paige. "I now have a better outlook on life, because I know I have a dependable path that I can take and a resource within the VA. I can now tell my boys that everything will be ok and mean it. I really do believe that angels are also in the VA."

VBA also knows that ensuring there is no wrong door for homeless Veterans, often means not waiting for a Veteran to come knocking. That is



why VBA conducts homeless outreach at shelters, town hall meetings, community events, Veterans treatment courts, and prisons.

VBA coordinates prevention and assistance efforts with the National Homeless Veterans Initiative Office, Veteran Health Administration Homeless Veterans Programs, Homeless Veterans Outreach Campaign, and the Advisory Committee on Homeless Veterans. VBA regional offices participated in nearly 200 Veteran homeless stand downs throughout the country in 2011.

In FY 2012, VBA continues its outreach efforts throughout the country. Recently, forty-five employees from the Phoenix office participated in a homeless standdown held in Phoenix, AZ. The employees manned workstations to assist Veterans with general benefits questions, claim status, claims intake, eBenefits registration and vocational rehabilitation and employment. One workstation was dedicated to assisting women Veterans.

"We had over 1,200 homeless Veterans attend this event, and we were able to help 350 Veterans with claims issues," said Sandy Flint, Director of the Phoenix Regional Office. "Out of the 350 Veterans we assisted, we took over 140 new claims."

Whether Veterans come to VA or VA comes to the Veterans, VBA ensures they know there is no wrong door.



HELP FOR HOMELESS VETERANS

Assistance is available, but knowing where to turn in a time of crisis is the first barrier that must be overcome. Veterans who are facing homelessness, but unsure of where their closest VA facility is, can begin getting the help they need by calling the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans at 1-800-424-3838. ★★☆☆





W2W PREPARES VETERANS FOR CAREERS AS CONTRACT SPECIALISTS

The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program is assisting the Department of Veterans Affairs Acquisitions Academy (VAAA) prepare severely wounded, ill and injured Veterans for successful careers as contract specialists at VA.

The VAAA's Warriors to Workforce (W2W) program provides Veterans an opportunity to apply military experience and skills to the acquisition career field. The program trains and educates Veterans to become contract specialists, creating a career path in federal acquisition for wounded warriors.

Coming back from deployment, transitioning to civilian life and re-entering the workforce can be a challenge; VAAA knew it would also require coordination of Veteran benefits, so it engaged with VR&E experts, said VAAA Chancellor Lisa Doyle.

Ruth Fanning, Director of VR&E Service, said VR&E was excited to be involved and see how this program could have tackle other VA workforce needs.

"We believe it's important to evaluate the workforce and the demand for skills within VA strategically and tactically," she said. "This program is helping fulfill VA's need for acquisition skills with qualified Veterans, who in return are gaining meaningful careers."

The program started in December 2011 with a small pilot group of 23 Veterans who met the qualifications of



having a service-connected disability and little to no post-high school education.

"The partnership between VAAA and VR&E has been very successful," Ms. Fanning said. "We helped identify about half of the qualified Veterans who are participating in this program. Once Veterans were identified, we were able to quickly ensure their benefit needs were met and relocate them to the training academy in Frederick, Md."

The 3-year program will combine both academic instruction and on-the-job training while having a built in promotion schedule for Veterans as they matriculate through the program. The Veteran starts the program as a GS-5 Procurement Analyst, advances to GS-7, GS-9 and then to GS-11 upon successful completion of the program when the Veteran is a qualified contract specialist and is placed in one of many VA offices throughout the country.

Although the program is still in its

infancy, both Ms. Doyle and Ms. Fanning are optimistic and see the academy's potential to increase Veteran employment.

"We look forward to continued collaboration to assist with benefits coordination and recruiting and hiring future cohorts given VR&E's sophisticated system to connect and support Veterans seeking employment," Ms. Doyle said.

Ms. Fanning hopes W2W becomes a model of a successful collaboration between two organizations within VA that can be easily expanded to help Veterans find meaningful careers.

"Already we have received positive feedback from the Veterans who are currently enrolled in the Warriors to Workforce program and although this is specific to acquisitions and the contract specialist, we hope it becomes the model to fulfill other employment needs here in VA and other Federal Government agencies," she said.





A NEW & MORE EFFICIENT CLAIMS PROCESSING FROM START TO FINISH

Flexibility – not the first word that comes to mind when thinking about a bureaucracy, but the use of Cross Functional Teams (CFT) is likely to change that. The Milwaukee, Ft. Harrison and Wichita Regional Offices are piloting the use of CFT as a means of improving claims processing timeliness and quality.

CFT takes a two-tiered approach to claims processing. First, create small teams that can process a claim from start to finish. This creates ownership of the claim within the team, as well as enhances the ability to cross-train team members, making it more efficient. Second, distribute the workload based on the complexity of claims. By identifying claims by complexity, the easier ones don't get held up in the process by more complex claims, and every claim gets the level of attention it deserves.

The legacy claims processing system resembled an assembly line. To illustrate: a triage team would receive a claim for compensation and enter the claim into the system for tracking purposes. The claim was then reviewed for completeness and sent to the pre-determination team if additional evidence was needed. The pre-determination team reviewed the claim, requesting medical exams, medical records, or other evidence needed, as appropriate, to support the claim. Once VA received all of the

“With CFT, one team is responsible for a claim throughout the entire claims process. The employees are very supportive of CFT, it makes cross-training and communication easier, and helps foster a team environment.”

required evidence, the claim was sent to the rating board. A rating specialist would review the claim to make sure all required evidence was available, weigh the evidence and then rate the claim, either granting or denying it. The claim was then sent to the post-determination team, where a letter was prepared notifying the Veteran of the decision made on his or her claim. If the claim was granted, the post-

determination team would also enter the award into the computer, passing the claim to an authorizer to approve the claim. At each step of the process a different person would perform their specific task until the claim was completed, potentially introducing delay and errors into the process.

“With CFT, one team is responsible for a claim throughout the entire claims process,” said Anthony Shows, the Change Management Agent for the Milwaukee Regional Office. “The employees are very supportive of CFT. It makes cross-training and communication easier, and helps foster a team environment.”

Teams consist of a comprehensive screener, Veterans service representatives and rating specialists. The comprehensive screeners are critical to the teams' success, as they determine if the claim is with the correct team and assess what action should be taken to get the claim ready to rate.

“We're fortunate that in Milwaukee all of our Veterans service representatives can function in the comprehensive screener role,” said Anthony Shows. “We've always emphasized training our employees to carefully screen claims prior to beginning development. Getting that first step right makes the entire claims process run more smoothly.”

