

How Customer Focus and Clear Goals Improved Service to Veterans: A Case Study of the Denver Regional Office

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Executive Overview

When the 2002 results of the C&P customer satisfaction survey were released in March of 2003, there was a small, but significant improvement in the national satisfaction score. Several individual stations showed even greater improvement, the Denver Regional Office being among them. The Surveys and Research Staff conducted several focus groups at that office to determine what actions the station had taken to bring about such a significant increase in customer satisfaction from FY2001 to FY2002. Claims processing timeliness did not improve during that period, so we assumed that the customer service improvements must be due to other factors.

Several themes emerged. One is that employees and managers prefer the CPI model over the earlier case management approach as they can be more efficient through specialization. They also like having clear goals so that everyone knows exactly what is required to succeed. The station exhibited a remarkable degree of teamwork and communication across teams, allaying any concern that individual teams would become isolated from each other, hindering employees' ability to manage the entire process. However, this teamwork came about largely from the experience of being on case management teams. By having to actually take part in all aspects of the claims process, including public contact, employees and managers were sensitized to the importance of each other's contribution. In addition, the case management emphasis on customer focus continued after moving to the CPI model, assuring that service to veterans remained a priority, even while striving to meet production goals.

With clear goals and a strong belief in serving veterans, the station undertook several specific steps to improve communication with veterans. Phone contact was improved by having a well-trained full-time public contact staff supported by improved information systems. Letters were redesigned and personalized so that information was clearer and more understandable to the veteran. Strong leadership played an important part in the improvement process by continually stressing the importance of serving veterans through cooperation within and between teams. Employees, in turn, began to own the organization's goals, motivating them to improve the claims process wherever possible.

Introduction

In the past several years, Veterans Service Centers have been asked to significantly change the way they do business. Under the previous Under Secretary for Benefits, VBA moved toward a “case managed” model of service delivery, where a single team took care of the veteran’s claim from receipt to final decision. The fact that there were fewer “hand offs” from one part of the organization to another was shown by several studies to increase veterans’ satisfaction with the entire process. However, during the move to case management, the backlog of claims grew significantly and the number of days it took to reach a decision on a claim increased.

A new process was put in place to address these concerns and to increase productivity and efficiency. The new process, the Claims Process Improvement (CPI) model, required that the claims process be broken down into steps addressed by specialized teams such as mail room and triage, public contact, pre-determination, rating, post-determination and appeals. It was hoped that these specialized teams could move the cases quicker, without sacrificing quality. However, the effect on employee satisfaction and veteran satisfaction was not specifically addressed as part of this new process. Would veterans be more satisfied with the claims process now that the cases were being rated more quickly, or would they be less satisfied because no single person or team was assigned to them to answer their questions and explain the process? Would employees become bored doing the same task over and over, or would they take more pride in their work because they could fully master it rather than being pulled from task to task?

This case study addresses some of these issues by exploring in depth the experience of one regional office that made the transition to the CPI model from case management, while significantly increasing veteran satisfaction. In addition, for the first time ever, the national C&P customer satisfaction score increased significantly in 2002. In a letter sent to Secretary Principi, VBA noted these increases and suggested that, “The customer service improvements driving these increases will be more thoroughly researched in the coming months in order to develop possible best practices for regional offices to adopt, as appropriate.” This paper is an attempt to outline in detail what some of those best practices might be.

Overview

In March of 2003, the Surveys and Research Staff released the results from the 2002 “Survey of Veterans’ Satisfaction with the VA Compensation and Pension Claims Process.” These survey data were collected between September 2002 and January 2003. When looking at the results, it was clear that several stations had significantly improved their customer satisfaction scores from 2001, and one

station, Lincoln, had the highest score ever recorded. Fully 71 percent of respondents served by the Lincoln Regional Office were somewhat or very satisfied with the way their claim was handled. Denver also had a significant increase during this period, increasing 14 percentage points from 51 percent satisfied in 2001 to 65 percent satisfied in 2002. The Philadelphia RO also posted a significant increase, going from 55 percent satisfied in 2001 to 63 percent in 2002.

When deciding which of these stations to study in depth, we wanted to visit a station with both high customer satisfaction scores *and* high employee satisfaction scores, assuming that we could learn more about how to leverage improved customer satisfaction from employees with high job satisfaction. Denver was the only station fitting both requirements. From 1999 to 2001, Denver employees' satisfaction increased over twelve points, going from a 63 percent job satisfaction rating in 1999 to 76 percent in 2001, based on a respectable response rate of 57 percent. In addition, employee responses indicate that positive ratings on the dimension of teamwork increased from 38 percent in 1999 to 54 percent in 2001.

Aside from the overall customer satisfaction scores, the Denver RO also had many other significant increases in performance from 2001 to 2002, most dealing with the office's ability to answer questions via phone, personal visit, and correspondence. There was a significant increase in the percentage of respondents who rated VA employees as very or generally helpful (65 percent in 2001 to 72 percent in 2002), and who said that VA fully addressed all of their questions, concerns, and complaints (56 percent in 2001 vs. 65 percent in 2002). This last item is known to be a key determinant of overall satisfaction.

One interesting facet of Denver's improved overall customer satisfaction score is that the improvement resulted primarily from respondents whose claim was pending or denied. As is usually the case, veterans served by the Denver RO whose claim was granted were more likely to be satisfied with the claim process than those whose claim was pending or denied. However, when looking at persons whose claim was denied, 39 percent of those served by the Denver RO were satisfied with the handling of their claim, compared with 27 percent nationally. There was also an increase in satisfaction for those whose claim was still pending; 55 percent of Denver's respondents were satisfied with the claims process, compared with 43 percent nationally. As an overall strategy for improvement, Denver retained the high satisfaction scores of those whose claim was granted, but also increased the lower scores of those whose claim was pending or denied, resulting in a significantly higher overall satisfaction score.

It should be noted that, unlike many other stations, Denver had largely transitioned into the CPI model early enough (January 2002) to have their 2002 customer satisfaction ratings reflect veterans' experience with the new model. As the sample was drawn in August 2002, most of the persons surveyed would

have had their most recent claim experience under the new process. As such, Denver's results may be a forerunner of what other stations might expect from the upcoming 2003 C&P survey results, collected after all stations had fully embraced the CPI model.

Another plus for conducting a study of Denver is that there has been a long-standing Director (Catherine L. Smith) at the station; Ms. Smith has been at the Denver RO since 1995. This allows a more long-term view of where the station has been and how it got to where it is today. Aside from the high employee and customer satisfaction scores, from FY2001 through FY2003, the station performed above the national average on traditional measures such as rating related and non-rating related claim timeliness. However, for the FY2001 to FY2002 timeframe corresponding to the increase in customer satisfaction scores cited in this paper, it should be noted that there was an *increase* in the number of days to complete rating related actions, from 177.2 days in FY2001 to 217.9 days in FY2002. The non-rating days to complete remained essentially the same at 38 days. *Thus, the improvements in customer satisfaction during this period cannot be attributed to improved timeliness of the claims process, but to other factors.* From FY2002 to FY2003 timeliness did improve substantially (rating related days to complete dropped to 162.5) and this is reflected in the fact that Denver was among those stations receiving Level II award money for superior performance in the C&P area in FY2003. One area that Denver did not improve in was in the appeals ratio. This number increased from 6.1 appeals per 100 decisions in FY2001, to 9.0 in 2002, to 13.8 in FY2003. This increase mirrored the national increase in appeals ratio during this period. (See Appendix A for background statistics on all performance measures).

Methodology

This case study is based on a variety of qualitative and quantitative sources. By gathering information from as many sources as possible, a more complete picture emerged detailing the causes and consequences of attitudinal and process changes and their effect on improved customer service. As mentioned above, we reviewed the results of Denver's 2001 employee survey results in detail to see where significant improvements had been made since 1999. In addition, we also reviewed the office's changes in C&P customer satisfaction results from 2001 to 2002. While interesting trends began to emerge, we could not determine *how* this improvement came about without speaking to those who brought about or experienced the changes themselves.

To this end, in late September 2003, we arranged an interview with the Director of the Denver Regional Office, and spent two days at the office conducting focus groups with veterans and front-line Veteran Service Center employees to gain their view of the actions taken which might have resulted in improved customer service. The employee focus group consisted of VSRs and RVSRs, representing

all units of the center, including triage, pre-determination, rating, post-determination, public contact, and appeals. We also conducted a focus group with managers, including the Veterans Service Center Manager, the Assistant Service Center Manager, and coaches from each type of team. The focus group guides were based on specific areas of improvement noted in the customer survey results; the participants were asked what actions taken at the office might have resulted in such improvements. Although not specifically asked, the participants also gave valuable background information on the observed changes from the case management to the CPI model of claims processing. We audiotaped the focus groups to allow us to capture the more important aspects of the discussion. The regional office personnel were extremely helpful in setting up these focus groups, providing a tour of the office, and assisting us in every way possible.

Unfortunately the veteran focus group resulted in little usable material for the purpose of this study. The veterans found it difficult to stay on the topic of recent service improvements, as many had decades of experience with the VA. Also, as the regional office includes a health clinic and other regional federal offices, it was difficult to have them recall interactions strictly with VBA as opposed to VHA or other federal offices. Since the purpose of the study was to examine the reasons for recent service improvements, the survey data proved to be more reliable than focus groups in determining which improvements had come about. The survey data were based on approximately 400 responses, as opposed to 9 participants in the focus group.

In addition, while a meeting was arranged with the National Veterans Service Officers, none chose to attend. While this additional information would have been useful, we feel we had more than enough material to review to prepare the case study.

The Denver Culture

In an interview with the Regional Office Director, it was clear that the station emphasized planning. Beginning in 1995, an annual two or three day planning activity took place, where managers could get to know each other and become familiar with each other's programs and responsibilities, particularly across benefit programs. They had outside contractors provide training on working in teams and on providing customer service during the push for case management, where the emphasis was placed on continually remembering who the customer was (customer focus), and the purpose (mission) of the office. The theme throughout was that "We are all in this together" and the employees were expected to show "team spirit" for *all* RO teams, whether one was a direct member or not.

During the move to case management, more emphasis was placed on the non-managers, getting them comfortable with their new roles in teams. When the office moved to the CPI model in January 2002, the emphasis then became making sure that the coaches were comfortable with their new roles and how to best meet the required production quotas.

Along with formal training, the office also participates in many community activities, such as a health fair with a local news channel, the Winter Sports Clinic, teaching at the local high school, and organizing and participating in the "Race for the Cure." Aside from benefiting the community, these activities strengthen the bonds between managers outside the office setting, building esprit and teamwork that carries over during office hours. It is also a practice of the Denver Regional Office to conduct open forums where managers and employees can express concerns. The station also started an internal mentoring program, to begin planning for eventual succession of younger members into vacated management positions.

In general, part of the Denver climate consisted of a real emphasis within the office on teamwork and customer focus. This emphasis showed in their employee satisfaction survey response to "Overall, how would you rate the quality of service provided to veterans by your office or facility?" In 1999, 64 percent of employees answered that it was very good or good; in 2001 this had increased to 77 percent. Teamwork also increased dramatically. When asked to agree or disagree with the statement "A spirit of cooperation and teamwork exists within my immediate work unit," 53 percent strongly agreed or agreed with this statement in 1999, compared with 72 percent in 2001.

Results of Manager and Employee Focus Groups

Separate focus groups were conducted with managers (coaches, the Service Center Manager and Assistant Service Center Manager) and with employees. Both groups had representation from a variety of positions including public contact, triage, pre-determination, ratings, and appeals. While managers didn't know what the employees had said in these groups (and vice-versa), there was a great deal of overlap in the key factors identified as direct contributors to their office's recent increases in veteran and employee satisfaction. The long-term experience of both managers and employees enabled them to give a thorough account of the changes in the office, as well as the potential effect of these changes.

Customer Focus

Initially, the managers told us that they thought that customer service had improved because, with the advent of the triage team, they were able to get

claims to the ready-to-rate stage more quickly, resulting in veterans getting decisions sooner than they used to. Also, with the pre-discharge centers working on claims while individuals were still in the service, they could get a decision in 10 or 15 days, reducing the days to complete a claim. Regardless of the outcome of the decision, the coaches and other managers attributed the increased customer satisfaction for their station to reduced claim turnaround time. They also thought that their letters were very good, having compared their correspondence with the letters of other offices, and that this also might have improved service.

However, the Service Center Manager quickly interjected a more fundamental reason for the improvement in service. He stated:

To me, the most important improvement is that our employees recognize veterans as people now, rather than a claim being processed. Before, four years ago, our employees (at least 90 percent of them), felt that a veteran was a hindrance and an interference with them doing their job. Now I think that 90 percent of them feel their job is the veteran. Whether it's on the telephone, whether it's a rating specialist writing a claim now so that the veteran understands the medical terminology, the decision, and the logic behind the decision. A lot of that's process improvements, rating redesign-- but the majority of it is in our employees' approach to doing their work.

The managers attributed this partially to the case management experience where everyone had to deal with the public. The very experience of employees having to sit across the desk from a veteran or to take an irate phone call, sensitized employees much more than was realized. Through the experience they gained empathy for their fellow employee who was trying to handle these interactions, and empathy for the veteran. As the managers related, at the first meeting on case management, about 35 percent of employees threatened to quit right there, stating "I am not talking to veterans." Now, the managers can give a request to call back a veteran to anyone on the floor and employees are willing and eager to return the call. "Merging the old VSD and Adjudication teams opened up everyone's eyes that there was more to it than just answering the phone or working the piece of paper. There was a veteran out there."

Improved Teamwork and Communication Within the Office

The employees' comments mirrored this sentiment. A key factor the employees discussed was the improvement in their working relationships with one another. The atmosphere of the office has changed dramatically to be much more team-oriented, and many credited case management--even though they did not like the experience overall--for breaking down the barriers between the different jobs and increasing communication within the office.

As an example of the office culture before the case management initiative, the employees stated that the Ratings Specialists were viewed at that time as untouchable “prima donnas”; other employees were not allowed to ask questions of them in person, instead, they were required to submit them in note form and wait for a written answer. All of the different claims processing sections felt that they were in direct competition with each other for rewards and accolades rather than feeling a part of one big team, and thus very little communication occurred between the sections.

The employees stated that although they did not like the team concept of case management because of the forced rotation into positions they were sometimes ill suited for, they did develop a deeper understanding of each segment of claims processing during this initiative. They said the case management experience forced all of the employees to break out of their comfort zones and learn about the other jobs within claims processing, which now engenders a certain level of camaraderie that was non-existent before. They have developed relationships with their fellow employees while on the teams that have carried over now that the office has moved into specialization. These relationships make it possible now for all groups to work together as a team to get claims decided in an accurate and timely manner. Now any employee is able to ask a question of an RVSR and get an immediate answer, and the RVSRs are eager to help speed the process in any way they can. Their attitude now is that they would rather have the VSRs come to them during development and ask what is needed to grant the claim, and then relay that information to the veteran, because it makes their job of rating that claim much easier. The employees in the focus group all felt comfortable asking for help from anyone in the office, and no longer felt any barriers or tension between groups. They have learned the value of each other’s jobs and that they all work together for a common purpose: to serve the veteran.

Managers also cited improved communication as a hallmark of the way the office operated now. They mentioned that lateral communication within a team used to be the norm, but now there was good vertical communication as well. Even though everyone is not on the same team now, there is still a lot of cross-communication because everyone realizes that the best way to serve veterans is to coordinate the communication among themselves.

This was evident from the increases on the employee survey between 1999 and 2001. In 1999, 41 percent of employees agreed that different work units cooperate to get the job done, in 2001 this rose to 55 percent. Also, the percentage of those who felt that a spirit of cooperation and teamwork existed in their immediate work unit increased from 53 percent in 1999 to 72 percent in 2001. Therefore, although the case management concept was not seen as an effective long-run approach to claims processing, the learning experience it provided all employees has proved invaluable on its own. The understanding and empathy created by actually stepping in other employees’ shoes for a brief

period has helped transform the atmosphere of the office into one of openness and respect.

Implementation of the CPI Model

Another important factor that employees pointed to as a reason for the improvement in Denver's performance over the last two years was the implementation of the CPI model. The move to specialization was a welcome one for the employees, because as mentioned previously, the case management system was not well liked. Also, the CPI model brought with the specialization much clearer goals and focus, and everyone in the office is now keenly aware of their exact job description and the standards they need to maintain.

A member of the triage team stated that it helped them greatly to be able to come in every day and know exactly what is expected of them and how much needs to be done. The team has dramatically reduced the lag time for incoming mail to be processed, and this has in turn increased the satisfaction of everyone from veterans calling in to inquire if the office received their documents to the ratings specialists waiting for that key piece of evidence to come in before they can decide the claim. One ratings specialist stated that before the CPI model, the mailroom had stacks of unprocessed mail that would sit for literally weeks before being associated with the claim folder. Often the RVSRs would have to sort through the unprocessed mail themselves in order to find something they knew was sent to them. Now the triage team knows their responsibility is to get all incoming mail processed by the end of the day so that the work can continue as soon as possible by the others in the office. The employees in the other sections have also developed expertise that increases their productivity greatly, and everyone agreed that specializing in the different areas was much more rewarding than trying to master all aspects of claims processing. (Note: In the 2001 employee survey, conducted before the CPI model was in place, one of the most common employee complaints was that they were expected to be a "Jack of all trades but a master of none.")

Managers were very supportive of having specific objectives to meet on a monthly basis, as part of the CPI model. They liked the fact that everyone knows where they are heading and what their objectives are, and what they have to shoot for. As one manager stated, "By having a target, then you set up processes to achieve that target or goal. If you don't know where you're going, it's like wandering in the wilderness. That's the good thing about the past year. We've had targets in front of us, and made adjustments because we knew what the ultimate target was."

They also mentioned that there wasn't a person in the Service Center who didn't know what their unit's goals were. This is largely because CO has drilled the goals down to the managers and they have drilled these down to the employees.

The members of the manager focus group also noted that, having taken ownership of the goals, the employees were excited about where they were and the progress that they had made. They also noted that as the employees adopted these objectives, they come up with ideas to improve the process, and that these ideas were very valuable as the employees were closest to the work. They also mentioned that there are boards up all over the Center, showing actual numbers and goals, as visual reminders of production goals. With the new focus on clear expectations, employees on the rating board know that if they don't make their goal it will be bad for others, and they in turn are concerned about other units meeting their goals. Employees have internalized these goals and walk down the hall asking, "Where are we today?" Some employees have even cancelled leave in order to qualify for Level II awards.

There also appears to be a degree of flexibility in how the CPI model operates. Rather than adhering strictly to a single type of team, employees are readily adaptable to taking on other tasks as needed. While they are not physically relocated very often, employees in the pre-determination team will move to the promulgation team at the end of the month to get the cases in the system. The opposite happens at the beginning of the month. If phone calls are up, the public contact team might request a VSR for a day or two. Even the employees from the Benefits Discharge Center in Carson Springs take turns coming into the Denver Regional Office one day a week to help on the phones. As one manager stated, "Employees recognize it's everybody's job, it's not just Anne's job or Paul's job, and that has helped tremendously."

All of the employees in the focus group agreed that the emphasis on production was justified and effective; they felt it was a necessary step that had to be taken to reduce the backlog and improve timeliness. However, they also expressed concern that too much was being asked of the current dwindling number of employees, and that this pace could not be maintained for much longer without an influx of well-trained new employees.

Managers acknowledge that the pace and the mandatory overtime have been "rough on everyone," but the results they have obtained are "amazing." One lesson learned as a result of success was to "not limit yourself." Both managers and employees began to realize this as they surpassed goals they previously thought impossible. They also think that a major contributor to the improvement process is that "they have fun." Not at the expense of veterans or of production, but they simply have *fun* with work. They noted that there are many people who really like their job, and not just those in public contact.

When asked whether there was a tradeoff between customer satisfaction and production, the managers saw no conflict between the two, as they went hand-in-hand. Their reasoning was that if production went up without a decline in quality, then customer satisfaction would follow; conversely, turning out inferior work would definitely result in lower satisfaction. The Service Center Manager went

on to say, “But we need to remember why we’re here. We’re here to serve veterans, we’re not here to produce work, not here to rate claims or guarantee homes, but to serve veterans. And as long as we keep that focus, we’re going to have customer satisfaction.” He went on to describe a potential scenario (not found in Denver) where an office could get too focused on production and forget the interaction and communication with the veteran. In this type of situation, employees could become brusque and short, either in correspondence or on the phone. If this happened, veterans would become dissatisfied with the answer they were given because the employees appeared to be only interested in the production end of it, rather than giving veterans the information they wanted and needed. He reiterated that even with the need to meet production quotas, the staff also has a charter to provide full service to veterans.

The Role of Management in Improved Service

As stated earlier, the top leaders and managers at the Denver Regional Office clearly model service to veterans in both their statements and their actions. The Service Center Manager, who has been quoted extensively above, was praised by employees for his outstanding leadership over the last few years. Despite the fact that he had little experience in claims processing, he was able to win the trust and respect of employees because of his willingness to listen and take advice, and because he made it a point to treat everyone with respect. Because of his open communication style, the employees trust the decisions he makes, even if they are not always popular, such as mandatory overtime. One employee stated simply that he “has a way of bringing out the best in people.” The employee survey again shows the improvements in satisfaction with leadership from 1999 to 2001. For example, the percent that agreed that managers communicated the goals and priorities of the organization increased from 53 percent in 1999 to 67 percent in 2001. Those who agreed that supervisors personally recognize the contributions of individuals and teams increased from 43 percent in 1999 to 64 percent in 2001. The employees in the focus group also recognized that in the absence of this kind of leadership, the improved atmosphere in the office might also disappear.

During the managers’ focus group, many participants mentioned that the coaches work really well together and “watch each other’s back.” Jokingly, they said they *had* to as they could be moved to another team on a moments notice, determined by a toss of the coin. But more seriously, they mentioned that they empathize with each other, and if they see something going on, they ask, “Do you know this is happening? Do you need someone to help?”

A manager who was not a coach volunteered that the coaches were the “oil and grease that kept things running.” He recounted that they give freely of themselves and lead a lot by example. When the unpopular decision to work mandatory overtime was made, all supervisors who had employees on overtime,

worked overtime themselves. His impression was that while the employees might not say anything about it, they notice that coaches have the same commitment they do, as they also gave up their free time. One manager said that he tells his employees that he has an open-door policy and that there are no dumb questions. This type of attitude builds trust so that if something is needed by the coach, the employees say “What do you want me to do?”

Partnering with Other Organizations

Several managers mentioned that they have developed a good rapport with the Service Organization Officers, and that they, in turn, serve as good liaisons with veterans. Having had TRIP training, the Service Officers now know what they really need to develop a claim and why. This allows them to support the office, by developing claims as fully as possible. The Appeals team uses the Service Organizations to contact veterans and do the legwork to get the necessary information. The Service Center Manager meets with the Service Officers on a monthly basis. The coaches, in particular, feel that they can express concerns and get a straight answer back through these meetings. While the Service Officers have access to anyone on the floor, they usually approach the coach first as a matter of respect if there is a disagreement with a decision or an inherent problem that needs to be addressed from a quality viewpoint. If it is simply a clarification of the logic of a decision, they can go to the rating specialist. The Denver staff also respects the need of the Service Officers to get answers to their questions. As such, they promise to get back to them by a certain time so the Service Officers don't have to ask a second time.

The Denver Regional Office has also forged an excellent relationship with the Medical Centers that provide the C&P medical exams. The office has worked hard to make the Centers understand what Denver's priorities are and they have tried to understand the priorities of the Medical Center. They are proud of the fact that there are not many offices where the RVSR can pick up the phone and question the quality of the exam, and have it immediately corrected without formal intervention. At the same time, the C&P Service Exam Chief can call the RVSR and say, “We got your request, but you forgot to tell us what you wanted us to exam.” Overall, this strong informal cooperation between VBA and VHA ends up benefiting the veteran by reducing the timeliness of the claim decision.

Public Contact

The manager and employee focus groups also provided a great deal of specific information about how contact with veterans has been improved in recent years. Both groups believe that there was a distinct advantage to having a dedicated public contact team who could focus full time on that very important job. Previously, under case management, managers thought that employees felt torn

between the work pending on their desk and answering calls, losing focus with both types of activities.

The employees welcomed the return to having a specialized public contact team, as it became clear under the case management system that certain employees who were used to working behind the scenes in rating claims, did not feel comfortable handling phone calls. They stated that, "The veteran could tell, they could smell fear, they knew you didn't want to be there." Some participants commented that another drawback to the system was that employees were required to handle phone calls and process a set amount of claims each day, and they began to view the veterans calling in as interruptions from the work they were being judged on. As a result, the communication was often somewhat rushed and impatient. Now that there is a specialized team who is in charge of the phones and in-person visits, they can devote the time needed to completely answer veterans' questions. Also, the rating specialists can now focus solely on getting a certain amount of claims rated every day, without having to take turns answering phone calls or interviewing veterans. They believe this concentration has helped greatly increase their efficiency over the last year.

Managers also echoed these comments. They mentioned that Denver has placed an emphasis on answering the phones and they watch the lost call rate closely. If it starts climbing in a day, the coach will request a VSR to help out for the next two days. Because of the case management experience, everyone realizes how important it is to answer the calls. Denver's lost call rate is now down to around 2 percent.

The Denver Regional Office also stresses the importance of giving correct information over the phone. In the past, they would fill out a request form (VAI), and the veteran might or might not get a call back. Now, they try to answer the question immediately, or if that is not possible, offer to find the answer and call them back as soon as possible. They now can pass an irate caller onto a supervisor who may have more authority to resolve the issue. This also reduces stress on the employees who are answering hundreds of calls a day. Managers also mentioned that the people working on the public contact team were "people" people who would rather talk to an angry veteran on the phone than work a claim. It is clear to managers that those who are on that team want to be there, and they want to *stay* there. Recently, when asked if they wanted to move to another team to get VSR certification, the employees on the public contact team said they wanted to stay with that unit, even if it meant that they have to go back to being a GS-9. This clearly shows how important the job is to them.

Aside from the growing expertise of the public contact team, improvements in technology have allowed employees working the phones to access databases of information quickly. The public contact team has developed expertise in using all of the different databases that house information regarding the veterans' claims and can draw on the information quickly. A member of the public contact team commented that the databases have become much more useful now that most of

the VSRs realize the need to fill them with as much information as possible and to keep that information current. The VSRs credit case management for educating them on the importance of having current and detailed information to provide to the veterans who call. After having the firsthand experience of not having any information for the veteran other than to tell them their claim is still pending, they can empathize with those currently on the public contact team. Thus, most of them have taken a more proactive approach in putting detailed notes into the databases for each claim. (Managers also stressed that they “hounded” employees to update CAPS, MAP-D, VACOLS, and COVERS and to “put those DISPS in there.”) There also is a requirement within the office that all claims be entered into COVERS every Thursday morning, so that there is no longer than a week lag from when a claim enters the office until it is in the system with notes attached and showing the current location of the file.

These changes undoubtedly contributed to the significant improvement in veteran satisfaction with phone contact from 2001 to 2002 at the Denver Regional Office. They experienced a significant increase in the percentage of veterans who said they received all or most of what they needed to know from their phone contact with VA, from 44 percent in 2001 to 56 percent in 2002.

Managers also noted that employees realize now that it is more efficient to take the time and answer all the questions the veteran is asking during a single phone call. If they do this, the veteran might not call back for awhile. However, if they rush to get the veteran off the phone, the veteran may call back because their perception is that they didn’t get a complete answer. Before, because of the lack of detailed information entered into the system, the callers would often get a different answer when they phoned again. The managers noted that this type of situation is much less common now. The office also emphasizes giving complete information, even if it is bad news. They believe that veterans feel that “It’s not what you tell me, but your willingness to tell me” and don’t want to be kept in suspense or in the dark when it concerns their claim. This approach of truthfully answering all questions the first time may be reflected by the fact that the average number of times a veteran contacted VA by phone (of those who contacted VA by phone) dropped significantly from 4.4 calls in 2001 to 3.6 calls in 2002.

Telephone contact is also used proactively by VSRs to help develop claims. Public contact is encouraged as part of development to clarify an initial claim. E-mail is also used for this purpose. The public contact team also uses this approach, as they have retained the capability of processing certain types of awards. Their experience in case management gave them a lot of insight into what is involved in processing a claim. As described by the managers, now the members of the team can pick up a folder and be more *specific* about what is needed-- “We need that treatment from Dr. Smith down in Pueblo; get that to us and we can complete your claim.” Before they would only have been able to say that that they needed more information. The rating board has also initiated

proactive contact with the veteran to obtain pieces of evidence in order to expedite the claim. According to the employees, this has worked really well, and veterans are shocked and surprised to have a rating person call them. Usually the veteran will then do whatever it takes to get the board the information they need to finish rating the claim. This has the effect of completing the rating more quickly than using traditional methods.

The improvements in the quality of the database information have also benefited veterans visiting the office. There was a significant increase in the percentage of respondents who said the Denver office was able to give specific claim information during their visit, from 66 percent in 2001 to 82 percent in 2002. There was also a significant increase in the percentage that thought the employees were very or generally helpful, from 65 percent in 2001 to 72 percent in 2002. The public contact team now works hard to make a good first impression with all veterans visiting the office. They provide complimentary coffee, funded by the employees themselves, in order to help put the veterans at ease during their visit. They also have added a back-up interviewer so that no veteran needs to wait longer than 15 minutes to speak with someone about their claim.

Correspondence

One of the major factors that contributed to the increases in satisfaction was their drive to improve written communication with the veteran. For example, between 2001 and 2002, the office underwent a significant effort to improve the PCGL letters to make them more informative to the veteran. The office felt the investment was worthwhile since a large amount of their phone calls were from veterans asking for explanations of the letters, or simply for more information than what was provided. The letters were revised to be as detailed and informative as possible, which sometimes meant the length of the letter significantly increased. However, because the letters now offered detailed information in an easy-to-understand format, the office experienced a significant increase from 2001 to 2002 on veteran satisfaction with correspondence. For instance, the percent of survey respondents who stated they received all or most of the information they needed to know through their written correspondence with VA increased significantly from 39 percent in 2001 to 59 percent in 2002. Also, the percent of survey respondents who thought VA's written reply to their inquiry was very or somewhat easy to understand increased significantly from 52 percent in 2001 to 74 percent in 2002.

The office also tried to include information in the development letters that would enable the veteran to send all of the required information in at once and have it processed immediately, thus reducing the total number of days required to process the claim. Such a letter would include a list of everything that was needed, which items the VA already had, which ones the VA would provide, and

which ones the veteran needed to provide. A member of the Spina Bifida team stated that the claim development letter they created mentioned specifically the four things that needed to be submitted, and also gave a fax number and phone number so that the information could be submitted immediately rather than waiting for it go through the mail. The focus group participants commented that part of the reason for this improvement is simply the growing expertise of the VSRs. Most of them have had enough experience now to be able to know all that is required for each type of claim and state it clearly at the beginning, where in the past it has been more of a piecemeal process as the VSR learned what else was needed throughout the claim development. While not statistically significant, there were several improvements in Denver's claim development scores in the 2002 C&P customer satisfaction survey. For example, 64 percent of respondents stated that the VA completely or mostly explained the steps to process a claim, up from 57 percent in 2001.

In order to prevent high numbers of calls from veterans wanting an explanation of their decision, the decision letter was also revised to include a plain language summary of the actual rating with the full decision attached, in order to make the rating more understandable for the veteran. It clearly spelled out what the decision was, the reasons for the decision, how much they would be awarded and when payments would start. A member of the public contact team stated that these letters did an excellent job of explaining the decision, which in turn made his job easier when a veteran did call in regarding the decision. The survey data also show that these letters improved: 86 percent of respondents in 2002 thought the letter clearly explained all of the reasons for the decision vs. only 79 percent in 2001.

The employees participating in the focus group felt that the new MAP-D letters are not specific enough to be helpful to the veteran, and thus are going to result in an increase of calls to the regional office asking for explanations or claim statuses. Both managers and employees expressed concern that customer satisfaction scores could decline if only these letters were used. Most of the employee group emphasized repeatedly that it would be a huge step backwards to use only the MAP-D letters, which do not allow for any tailoring to meet the needs of individual veterans. They agreed that there should be a basic standard letter in order to be consistent across the nation, but the participants felt that local offices should be part of the committee that creates these letters, and that there should always be an option to personalize the letters. They also recommended the establishment of a nationwide database where people can access the letters from all offices if they need to refer to them, rather than trying to make every office's letters exactly the same.

Future Concerns

In the course of listening to the managers and employees discussing the customer satisfaction issues in the focus groups, several concerns emerged. The employees' major complaint with the current system was the amount of pressure they were under to reduce the backlog, and the associated mandatory overtime. The extreme focus on meeting their numbers, while not being able to increase their number of employees, has contributed to the burnout of many employees over the last two years, several of which were new hires. One person commented that the major reason so many of the newer hires left was because they were not adequately prepared for the amount of work they would be required to do, the training and orientation given to them did not prepare them for what the actual job would entail.

Managers also stressed that the most pressing need was for replacement employees as many of the new hires had left the station and other seasoned employees were getting ready to retire. Every rating specialist that was hired in the past two years (with the exception of those hired internally) has left. They also echoed the employees concerns that the pressure to get claims out, combined with mandatory overtime, has led some people to leave and some to become exhausted from the rate of operation. While working mandatory overtime for months was necessary to meet the goals, all seemed to agree that the office can't meet production quotas permanently by having people work overtime. They believed that without more staffing, productivity will eventually fall off.

Managers said they are reaping the rewards of the crest of people who came in with the Opportunity classes, stayed, and now have the experience to be highly productive. Several thought that this infusion of new personnel had a lot to do with driving the positive achievements of the office. However, as it takes two to five years to train a rating specialist, they stressed the need to get new hires in the pipeline now to sustain the office's success. They pointed out that even if these individuals were hired tomorrow, they wouldn't be productive for at least a year. While it took three years to dig out from not having enough experienced personnel in the past, they thought it would only take 12 months or so to fall back in that hole if new hires weren't brought in to replace those who left.

The employees were also concerned about the rotation of VSRs as part of the certification and classification process. They feel that the expertise gained by specializing in one area is much more beneficial for the office, and that it is not possible for employees to become proficient in handling EPs they may only see once every six months. One employee stated that with the rotation of VSRs, "the education and experience level is just going to go out the window. It's a major mistake. If they wanted to certify in their particular skill area that's fine, but people can't get proficient at every last task a VSR does. Quality is going to suffer."

Another concern was the sheer amount of staff time that was needed to fill multiple requests from CO. Some managers thought that, in some cases, the demand to collect and maintain data and reports just so that CO could have that information at hand, takes valuable time away from working claims and serving veterans. Further, they were concerned that additional layers of review, such as will be required by SIPA, might result in having to take someone off of production. Managers were concerned these demands, along with resource loss without replacement, will serve to hinder the accomplishment of the office's mission. In their words, "There's no way around it. If it is directed by CO you have to do it, and do it correctly, but something has to give."

Although the major topics of discussion during the focus groups were the office's improvements, employees, coaches and managers provided valuable insight for management, at both the regional and central office levels, intended to prevent what they saw as impending problems that would cause veteran and employee satisfaction to decline. It was clear from all of their comments that these participants were dedicated to providing the best service possible to the veterans; they were proud of their office's achievements and had a strong desire to continue improving. Managers and non-managers alike took ownership of the office's goals, which in turn generated numerous ideas for process improvements. Also, rather than allowing themselves to be overwhelmed with number-crunching and production quotas, they have remained true to what they see as their primary focus: providing caring and compassionate service to all veterans, one at a time.

Appendix A: Background Statistics on Recent Improvements

Employee Satisfaction Improvements - Statistically significant increases in the percent who agreed or strongly agreed with survey items below from 1999 to 2001:

Survey Items by Dimension	1999 percent	2001 percent
Rewards/Recognition		
Supervisors personally recognize the contributions of individuals and teams	43	64
Training and Career Development		
Employees receive training and guidance in providing high quality customer service	38	52
Supervisors/team leaders support employee efforts to train outside the job	19	34
Innovation		
Supervisors/team leaders are receptive to change	28	48
Fairness and Treatment of Employees		
Advancement opportunities are available for qualified individuals regardless of gender, race, national origin, religion, age, cultural background, sexual orientation, or disability	35	58
Communication		
Managers communicate the goals and priorities of the organization	53	67
Managers promote communication among different work units	27	41
Employee Involvement		
Supervisors/team leaders provide employees with the opportunity to demonstrate their leadership skills	35	51
Use of Resources		
Employees provide high quality products and services	22	75
The amount of work is reasonable	22	39

Teamwork		
Different work units cooperate to get the job done	41	55
Employees are rewarded for working together in teams (for example, performance ratings, cash awards, certificates, public recognition)	24	48
A spirit of cooperation and teamwork exists in my immediate work unit	53	72
Strategic Planning		
There is an established, formal process for developing goals and updating plans periodically	25	43
Managers review and evaluate the organization's progress toward meeting its goals and objectives	51	74
Supervision		
There is trust between employees and their supervisors/team leaders	30	48
Personal Experiences		
I am given a real opportunity to improve my skills in my organization	38	56
Overall, how would you rate the quality of service provided to veterans by your facility or office? (Percent who chose Good or Very Good)	64	77
Job Satisfaction (Very or somewhat satisfied with...)		
Your pay	41	60
Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job?	63	76

Customer Satisfaction Improvements - Statistically significant increases in the survey items below from 2001 to 2002:

Survey Items	2001 percent	2002 percent
Phone Communication		
Average number of times a veteran contacted VA by phone (of those who contacted by phone)	4.4	3.6
Percent who got all or most of what they needed to know through their phone contact with VA	44	56
In-person Visit		
Average amount of time a veteran thought was reasonable to wait to see a VA employee in person (minutes)	13.7	11.6
Percent who said VA was able to give claim information during their in-person visit (of those who spoke with a VA staff person and needed claim information)	66	82
Mail Correspondence		
Average times a veteran wrote to VA about a claim (of those who wrote to VA)	3.6	2.3
Percent who thought it was very or somewhat easy to understand VA's written reply	52	74
Percent who received all or most of what they needed to know through their written correspondence with VA	39	59
Overall Impressions		
Percent who were very or somewhat satisfied with the handling of their claim	51	65
Percent who said VA employees were very or generally helpful	65	72
Percent who said VA full addressed all of the questions, concerns and complaints	56	65

Overall Satisfaction (percent who were very or somewhat satisfied with claim handling) by Status of Claim, 2002

	Granted at an amount greater than or equal to expected	Granted at an amount lower than expected	Denied	Pending
Nation	89	57	27	43
Denver	87	55	39	55

FY 2001 through 2003 Performance Data

Performance Items	National FY 2001	<i>Denver</i> FY 2001	National FY 2002	<i>Denver</i> FY 2002	National FY 2003	<i>Denver</i> FY 2003
Days to complete (rating related actions)	180.8	177.2	223.9	217.9	181.5	162.5
Days to complete (non-rating related actions)	54.5	38.0	60.3	37.7	58.6	22.0
Appeals per 100 decisions	8.1	6.1	9.0	9.0	13.4	13.8