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# Service Bulletin

**June 2013**

## **DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)**

<http://www.va.gov/>

### **VA and Veterans Service Organizations Joint Initiative to Reduce Claims Backlog**

[http://www.benefits.va.gov/transformation/docs/VA Strategic Plan to Eliminate the Compensation Claims Backlog.pdf](http://www.benefits.va.gov/transformation/docs/VA_Strategic_Plan_to_Eliminate_the_Compensation_Claims_Backlog.pdf)

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Disabled American Veterans, and The American Legion announced a new partnership on May 21, 2013 to help reduce the compensation claims backlog for veterans. The effort—the Fully Developed Claims (FDC) Community of Practice—is a key part of VA’s overall transformation plan to end the backlog in 2015 and process claims within 125 days at 98% accuracy. VA can process FDCs in half the time it takes for a traditionally filed claim.

Claims are considered to be “fully developed” when veterans submit all available supporting evidence, like private treatment records and notice of federal treatment records, to VA at the time they first file a formal claim and certify they have no more evidence to submit. This is the information that VA needs to make a determination on a disability claim. The FDC program supports the sharing of best practices across Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), who help thousands of veterans each year with their compensation claims, to identify up front all evidence necessary to support a veteran’s claim. Veterans then certify that they have no additional evidence to submit, and VA can process the claim in half the time it takes for a traditionally filed claim.

VSOs have long played an integral role in submitting veterans’ claims. VA has consulted with them throughout the development and implementation of its plan to end the backlog in 2015 to ensure best practices and their unique insights were incorporated. Meaningful progress will be felt by increasing numbers of veterans as more VSOs participate with VA in the FDC program. Members of the DAV National Service Department and National Service Officers are visiting VA Regional Offices to review the FDC process implementation, as part of the White House “Joining Forces” initiative. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/joiningforces/>

This is the latest effort in support of the Secretary's plan to reduce the backlog. In April, VA announced an initiative to expedite compensation claims decisions for veterans who have waited one year or longer. On April 19, VA began prioritizing claims decisions for veterans who have been waiting the longest, by providing provisional decisions that allow eligible veterans to begin collecting compensation benefits quickly. With a provisional decision, a veteran has a year to submit additional information to support a claim before the decision becomes final.

On May 15, VA announced that it is mandating overtime for claims processors in its 56 regional benefits offices through the end of fiscal year 2013 to help eliminate the backlog, with continued emphasis on high-priority claims for homeless veterans and those claiming financial hardship, the terminally ill, former Prisoners of War, Medal of Honor recipients, and veterans filing Fully Developed Claims. As of May 17, the paperless claims processing system known as the Veterans Benefits Management System, or VBMS, has been deployed to 46 out of 56 regional office locations, and about 18% of VA's current claim inventory is in an electronic format.

Claims for servicemembers separating from the military for medical reasons will continue to be handled separately and on a priority basis with the Department of Defense through the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES).

### **New Technology for Electronic Submission of Disability Claims**

<http://www.ebenefits.va.gov>

The joint VA-Department of Defense Web portal *eBenefits*, now integrates with the new internal Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS) electronic claims processing system, assisting in the VA transformation from paper claims records to a fully digital operating environment. VBMS has now been fielded at all 56 Regional Offices across the country. Instead of filling out and mailing paper forms to VA, veterans can now use *eBenefits* to enter claim information online using a step-by-step, interview-style application, with pre-populated data fields and drop-down menus similar to popular tax preparation software.

By filing electronically, any compensation benefits that are awarded will be effective back to the date the veteran started entering their claim information in *eBenefits*. From that initial claim establishment date, each veteran has up to a year to gather all necessary records and hit "submit" to preserve their original date of claim. *eBenefits* allows veterans to upload digital images of records and evidence to support their claims, bypassing the need to physically mail in personal records and wait for confirmation of receipt.

Veterans are encouraged to gather and submit all relevant medical records and file a Fully Developed Claim (FDC) in *eBenefits*, which entails entering all available evidence at the time the claim is submitted and verifying to VA that they have no more evidence to submit. Veterans filing an FDC will receive priority processing over the traditional

claims process. VA can typically process FDCs in half the time it takes for a traditionally filed claim.

Once logged into *eBenefits*, veterans can also choose to have an accredited DAV representative assist with their claim submission by filing an electronic power of attorney form. Using a companion portal, the DAV representative, with proper authorization, will be able to see the contents of a veteran's claim, track its status, and add additional information when needed. A veteran and his representative can even work a claim simultaneously while both are logged into the system.

VA will still accept claims in paper form, though processing may take longer than for an electronically-submitted claim. Currently, VA scans all new paper claims and uploads them into VBMS so they too can be processed electronically, though without many of the benefits provided when veterans initiate the process in *eBenefits* such as guided questions that help ensure complete and accurate information and the immediate receipt of information without having to wait for the scanning and processing of paper documents. In addition to filing claims online, registered *eBenefits* users can track their claim status and access information on a variety of other benefits, like pension, education, health care, home loan eligibility, and vocational rehabilitation and employment programs.

A Premium *eBenefits* account is required to file claims electronically. The quickest and most convenient method of establishing a free premium *eBenefits* account is to complete the remote verification process through the *eBenefits* home page, or use DoD's common access card (CAC) to register for and/or upgrade to a free premium account. Veterans can also establish an account by telephone at 1-800-827-1000, option 7, if they are in receipt of VA benefits via direct deposit, or by visiting a VA regional office or TRICARE Service Center (if they are a military retiree).

### **Draft Gulf War Task Force Report Released**

[http://www.va.gov/opa/publications/Draft\\_2012\\_GWVI-TF\\_Report.pdf](http://www.va.gov/opa/publications/Draft_2012_GWVI-TF_Report.pdf).

VA's Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses Task Force has published a draft report describing how VA will address the concerns of veterans who were deployed during the Gulf War in 1990 and 1991. This year's report continues to focus on efforts to improve health care for Gulf War veterans including enhancements to clinical care. The draft report identifies seven specific areas where VA will strive to improve services for Gulf War Veterans. VA has created a public discussion board on the seven focus areas at: <http://vagulfwartaskforce.uservoice.com/>.

The seven areas focus on important components of health care, such as veteran-centric approaches to specialty and primary care, delivering veteran benefits, and improving open communications with Gulf War Veterans. The Task Force also developed plans to improve linkages between specialty knowledge and services at the basic point of care to

address treatment for chronic multi-symptom illness, an ongoing concern of Gulf War veterans, their families and their providers.

VA and the Department of Defense recently approved a research project to develop a long-term exposure record to collect and share deployment and exposure data between the two Departments, a model informed by lessons learned in earlier Gulf War studies.

### **VA Launches Hotline for Women Veterans**

A new VA hotline - **1-855-VA-WOMEN (1-855-829-6636)** – has launched to provide information about the VA services and resources available to women veterans. The hotline is staffed by VA employees who can provide information about benefits including health care services for women. Callers can be linked to information on claims, education or health care appointments as well as information about VA cemeteries and memorial benefits. Staff can also answer urgent questions and provide referrals to homeless and mental health services as well as provide Vet Center information.

Women make up nearly 15 percent of today's active duty military and 18 percent of National Guard and Reserve forces. The population of women veterans using VA benefits including health care is growing rapidly. Since 2000, the number of women using VA health care more than doubled, from nearly 160,000 in 2000 to more than 354,000 in 2012. Based on the upward trend of women in all branches of service, the number of women veterans using VA services will continue to increase.

### **New Grants to Help End Veterans' Homelessness**

<http://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/GPD.asp>

VA has announced two new grants to support the goal of ending veterans' homelessness by 2015. Under these new programs, homeless providers can apply for funding to enhance the facilities used to serve homeless veterans, and acquire vans to facilitate transportation of this population.

Approximately \$22 million in rehabilitation funds will be available to current operational Grant and Per Diem grantees as part of the effort to increase the useful life of the facilities previously funded under the program. VA expects current Grant and Per Diem grantees will apply for funding to rehabilitate their current project location and enhance the safety, security and privacy issues associated with the homeless Veteran populations they serve. A maximum of \$250,000 is available per award and the award will not be more than 65 percent of the estimated total cost of the rehabilitation activity. VA has established funding priorities to support its oldest capitally funded projects.

In addition, approximately \$2 million in funds will be available for current operational Grant and Per Diem grantees to assist in the acquisition of vans in order to facilitate transportation of veteran participants to medical appointments, employment

opportunities in the community, and facilitate grantees' outreach activities. The maximum award for a van will be \$35,000. The amount of the award will not exceed 65 percent of the total cost of the van.

### **HUD and VA to Provide Homes to 9,000 Homeless Vets**

Approximately 9,000 homeless veterans living on the streets and in the nation's shelter system will soon find a permanent place to call home. HUD will provide \$60 million to local public housing agencies across the country to offer permanent supportive housing to homeless veterans, many of whom are living with chronic disabling conditions.

The supportive housing assistance is provided through the *HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) Program* which combines rental assistance from HUD with case management and clinical services provided by VA. Since 2008, a total of 48,385 vouchers have been awarded and 42,557 formerly homeless veterans are currently in homes because of HUD-VASH.

The grants are part of \$75 million appropriated this year to support the housing needs of homeless veterans. Local public housing authorities provide rental assistance to homeless veterans while nearby VA Medical Centers (VAMC) offer supportive services and case management. This is the first round of the 2013 HUD-VASH funding. HUD expects to announce more HUD-VASH funding this summer.

VAMCs work closely with homeless veterans and refer them to public housing agencies for these vouchers, based upon a variety of factors, including the duration of the homelessness and the need for longer term more intensive support to obtain and maintain permanent housing. The HUD-VASH program includes both the rental assistance the voucher provides and the comprehensive case management that VAMC staff provides.

## **DEPARTMENT OF LABOR (DOL)**

### **Job Training and Employment Services Grants for Homeless Female Veterans and Veterans with Families**

<http://www.dol.gov/vets>

DOL has made available up to \$5 million to fund 16 or more homeless female veterans and veterans with families grants. Approximately 1,900 veterans will be eligible to receive job training and related services under this program.

Funds for the grants are being awarded on a competitive basis to state and local workforce boards, local public agencies and nonprofit organizations, tribal governments and faith-based and community organizations. Grantees must be familiar with the areas and populations to be served, and have demonstrated that they can administer effective

programs and coordinate their efforts with various local, state and federal social service providers. Homeless female veterans and veterans with families may receive occupational, classroom and on-the-job training, as well as job search and placement assistance, including follow-up services.

The solicitation for grant applications is available at <http://www.grants.gov>. Potential applicants seeking more information should visit <http://www.dol.gov/vets>.

## **DAV National Service Department Program Updates**

<http://www.dav.org/veterans/>

- **DSO/CSO Certification Program:**
  - Total number of certifications and re-certifications in 2013: 782
  - Total number of Departments involved: 11
  
- **Transition Service Program (TSP):**
  - Total number of 2013 TSP participants: 28,038
  - Applications filed: 9,036
  
- **Mobile Service Office (MSO) Program:**
  - Total number of claims filed: 4,340
  - Total number of Powers of Attorney executed: 1,823
  - Total number of interviews: 5,415
  - Total memberships: 140
  - Total miles driven: 32,983
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- **Service Seminar Program:**
  - Total number of 2013 Service Seminars: 14
  - Total number of persons attending: 1,534
  - Total number of interviews: 443
  - Total number of claims filed: 190
  - Total number of new members: 12



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