



System Worth Saving Site Visit Report

- **Date:** January 27, 2021
- **Location:** Virtual Meeting
- **Attendees:**
 - Rehab Committee Members*- Chairman Wilson Spence, Gary Munkholm, Daniel Tengwall, and Jim Finley
 - *Department Service Officer*- Jeremy Wolfsteller
 - *MDVA Claims Director*- Ron Quade
 - St Paul VA Regional Office*- Director Kim Graves, *VSC Manager*- Jessica Gillette and *Data Analyst*-Zach Chase

- **Purpose**

The American Legion Dept. Rehabilitation Committee is tasked with staying engaged with agencies that aid Minnesota veterans. The committee does this by conducting System Worth Saving Site Visits throughout the year. These locations include Sioux Falls, Fargo, St. Cloud and Minneapolis VA Health Care Systems, St. Paul Regional Offices, Minneapolis, Hastings, Luverne, Fergus Falls and Silver Bay Veterans Homes. Additional Site Visits are conducted at VA CBOC's, Vets Centers, and Minnesota nonprofits that serve veterans when the budget allows.

St. Paul VA Regional Office Overview:

The St. Paul VA Regional Office administers a variety of benefits and services, including compensation, pension and veteran's readiness and employment for veterans, servicemembers, their families and survivors in MN and Nationally.

Additional Services include:

- Counseling about eligibility for VA benefits
- Information about VA Health Care and memorial benefits
- Outreach to veteran, homeless or at risk for homelessness and older, minority and women veterans
 - Public Affairs
- Assistance with applying for specially adapted housing grants
- Administration of VA's Home Loan Guaranty Program for a 9-state region





FY21 St. Paul VA Regional Office ROAR Site Visit

Overview Continued

Rating Bundle: Claims for disability compensation, dependency and indemnity compensation, and Veterans' pension benefits, including both original and supplemental claims. Rating Bundle claims normally require a rating decision during processing. VA's goal of eliminating the backlog in 2015 is specific to the Rating Bundle. Initial claims for entitlement will also typically determine eligibility for medical treatment from VHA and other VA benefits.

Not-Rating: Claims for ancillary benefits, which can but normally do not require a rating decision (i.e. claim to add dependent to award), and benefit adjustments, such as for drill pay (compensation) or changes to income and/or medical expenses (pension)

Program Review: Work based on internal controls to audit, review, and ensure benefits and entitlements are properly decided in accordance with laws and regulations. These review processes are conducted by a division's Quality Review Team using specific checklists outlined in the M21-1 Adjudication Procedures Manual.

Other: Work that has no effect on entitlement but may require a rating decision that effects monetary benefits

Burial: Claims associated with burial benefits.

Accrued: Claims related to benefits not paid prior to the death of a Veteran or survivor based upon a claim granted after the applicant's death or benefits in withholding at the time of death

Appeals: Claims based on a beneficiary's disagreement with a VBA decision.

IDES: Claims under control of the joint DoD/VBA Integrated Disability Evaluation System program.





FY20 St. Paul VA Regional Office Site Visit

Meeting Minutes:

Claims Inventory: *These numbers are estimated and represent VA's current pending workload nationally*

Total claims pending (including non-rating claims): Approximately 800,000

Rating claims only: 480,000

Claims Backlog (pending more than 125 days): 210,000

Wait Times for Adjudication: *The figures below represent before the pandemic (March 2020) and VA's current workload. The drastic increase in wait times is attributed to the suspension of C&P exams (which are now being completed) and NPRC only fulfilling emergency record requests.*

Compensation: Before (ADP) was 80 days nationally. Currently (ADP) is 151 days nationally.

Pension: Before (ADP) 90 days nationally. Currently (ADP) is 123 days nationally.

Dependency Indemnity Compensation (DIC): Before (ADP) was 128 days nationally. Currently (ADP) is 149 days.

Non- Rating Claims: Before (ADP) was 151 days. Currently (ADP) is 124 days nationally.

Benefits Eligibility Support Team (BEST): October 2020, VBA realigned how it addresses non-rating claims. BEST Teams were created at 8 VA Regional Offices, including: Detroit, Little Rock, Milwaukee, Muskogee, Nashville, San Diego, St. Paul and Winston Salem. St. Paul's BEST Team has 130 FTE to work non-rating claims. While specialized control of this workload has improved efficiency, higher ADP on average is inherent in this workload due to many claims requiring a minimum 60-day due process period.

Staffing Levels: *Workload distribution via the national work queue is based on each VARO's staffing levels and the level of employment these positions represent.*

Vacant Positions: VSC Manager and a PMC Data Analyst

Divisions not under St. Paul VA Regional Office: The Regional Loan Center is no longer part of St. Paul Regional Office, as that program area reports directly to Loan Guaranty Service in VA Central Office. The RO provides space for employees of VBA's Education Service and the Education Regional Processing Office which covers Minnesota. VA's Debt Management Center (DMC) is physically located in the same building as the St. Paul Regional Office but is completely separate from the RO.

RO authorized staffing levels:

- VSC: 248 FTE
- PMS: 335 FTE
- BEST: 130 FTE
- VR&E: 15
- RLC: 77 (not part of the RO, but the RO provides HR & related services)
- Support Services: 44
- Director's Office & HR: 12
- RO Total authorized FTE ceiling: 784





Meeting Minutes Continued:

Minnesota Veteran Population Data: *(Values are based on an estimate for FY19)*

Current MN Veterans: 308,725

Currently receiving compensation: 100,241

Monthly amount paid: \$95,467,339

Annual amount paid: \$1,145,608,065

Currently receiving pension: 2,892

Monthly amount paid: \$2,726,842

Annual amount paid: \$32,722,107

The American Legion Power of Attorney:

Currently representing: 43,679

Monthly amount paid: \$37,255,517

Annual amount paid: \$447,066,204

Medical Disability Examinations: *Compensation & Pension Exams (C&P's)*

The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) administers Compensation & Pension (C&P) examinations to veterans, their dependents, and their survivors. A C&P exam is a critical piece of evidence for determining the extent of disability. As such, the examination and accompanying report must provide the required detailed findings sufficient for VA adjudicators to arrive at an appropriate determination.

Due to legislation passed in 2014 it allowed VA to outsource C&P exams, an increasing number of veterans are receiving their C&P exams outside of the Administration.

A recent realignment of VA's Medical Disability Examination Office moved from VHA to VBA where now ALL C&P's are contracted out to Private Firms.

Examinations given by VA-contracted providers are referred to as medical disability examinations (MDE). VA awarded contracts in 2016 to five private firms to conduct the MDEs: (1) VetFed Resources; (2) Logistics Health Inc.; (3) Medical Support Los Angeles; (4) QTC Medical Services, Inc.; and (5) Veterans Evaluation Services, Inc. However, in a recent GAO Report it has been found that VA does not have the tools to track whether private-sector medical providers are accurately giving examinations that help determine whether veterans are eligible for VA benefits.

VA Regional Offices have no interactions or oversight with the C&P Firms in their state.

Oversight and quality review of private-sector exam providers is conducted by VA's Medical Disability Examination Office (MDEO). VA Regional Offices provide input to MDEO if they are aware of local issues.





Meeting Minutes Continued:

Appeals:

VA Regional Office Stations are not informed of how many of their adjudicated decisions were appealed.

BVA Video Conference Hearings: These are in-person video conferences with a veteran's law judge. March 2020 these were suspended due to the pandemic. St. Paul is anticipating resuming several video conference hearings per month in March.

New Virtual Tele-BVA Hearings: These are essentially the same as a video conference hearing, but the veteran can do it virtually with a computer or smart phone.

Remands: *These are BVA appeals that are sent back to VARO's for further development*

VARO's work on a certain number of remands per year based on what is in the NWQ.

FY20 St. Paul VARO VSC worked 454 remands from BVA and the PMS worked 351.

Quality Assurance Quality Control: *VARO's have designated FTE in the VSC, BEST and PMC to review cases.*

All elements of any action taken on a claim are reviewed, from rating and authorization accuracy to systems compliance and notification letters.

Reviews are not just St. Paul decisions, Q/C is pulled from the NWQ.

Last Fiscal Year the St. Paul Quality Review Team (QRT) launched a systems compliance awareness campaign which resulted in a reduction of S1 errors in the division. Errors categorized as "S1" are those involving systems compliance, such as correctly identifying evidence as received or having accurate special issue identifiers included. Additionally, St. Paul VSC provided impact training on examination requests and effective dates. In-process quality reviews are routinely conducted to assist claims processors in quality improvement through on-the-spot feedback, as well as to prevent errors before they occur. Error trends are continuously monitored, and appropriate training is provided to employees.

A specific training course on system updates/compliance is provided to Veterans Service Representatives (VSRs) and Claims Assistants each year along with training course on income/medical expense counting and other topics reviewed annually as determined by Compensation Service and Pension & Fiduciary Service.

Approximately 400 in-process reviews (IPR) are completed each month by the Quality Review Team (QRT). An IPR is a non-punitive review designed to correct deficiencies throughout the claims process. If a deficiency is identified, the employee is provided immediate feedback from a QRT member.

Department Rehabilitation Chairman: Wilson Spence III

Department Service Officer & Committee Secretary: Jeremy Wolfsteller

