



St. Paul VA Regional Office Site Visit Report FY 2022



Date: December 16, 2021

Location: Virtual Meeting

Dept. Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Committee- Chairman Wilson Spence III, Secretary Jeremy Wolfsteller, Dan Tengwall, Mike Rosecrans, Lynn Lyons, and Jim Finley.

Legion VA&R Staff: Department Service Officer Jeremy Wolfsteller, VA&R Benefits Coordinator Sarah Sturner

Meeting Attendance: Chairman Spence, Dan Tengwall, Jim Finley, Mike Rosecrans, Lynn Lyons. Director Kim Graves and Leadership Team.

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 CBOCs, Vets Centers, and Minnesota nonprofits that serve veterans when the budget allows.

St. Paul VARO 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, service members, their families, and survivors in MN and Nationally.

Compensation and Pension Claims

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 by 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 does not affect entitlement but may require a rating decision that affects monetary benefits

Burial: Claims associated with burial benefits.

Accrued: Claims related to benefits not paid before 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 the joint DoD/VBA Integrated Disability Evaluation System program control.

- **VBA Updates:**
 - New COVID Claim policy released
 - QRTLTY Claims Clinics (virtual)
 - Developing an MST Claims Processing Site (hiring 150 employees)
- **Claims Inventory:** These numbers are estimated and represent VA's current pending workload national

- 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.*
PDA (Active Days Pending)
 - 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):** In 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.
 - Examples of non-rating claims are drill pay, administrative reviews, and dependency claims.
- **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. PMC Needs to hire 53 VSRs, VSC needs 13 more RVSRs.
 - VIP Vacant Positions (VSC Manager position was recently filled).
 - RO Total authorized FTE ceiling: 784
 - VSC: 248 FTE
 - Support Services: 44
 - PMC: 335 FTE
 - Director's Office & HR: 12

- BEST: 130 FTE
- VR&E: 15
- RLC: 77 (not part of the RO, but the RO provides HR & related services)
- **Minnesota Veteran Population Data:** (Values are based on an estimate for FY19)
 - Current MN Veterans: 312,843
 - 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&Ps)
 - A recent realignment of VA's Medical Disability Examination Office moved from VHA to VBA where C&Ps 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.
 - 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.
- **Quality Assurance Quality Control:** VAROs 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's decisions, Q/C is pulled from the NWQ.
- In recent years, the St. Paul Quality Review Team (QRT) launched a systems compliance awareness campaign, resulting 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 a 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.

Committee Chairman: *Wilson Spence*

Committee Secretary and MN DSO: *Jeremy Wolfsteller*