

PROCEDURES FOR PROCESSING CLAIMS FOR HOMELESS VETERANS

1. **Purpose.** This circular outlines procedures for VSD (Veterans Services), Administrative and Adjudication Divisions in controlling and processing VA benefit claims for veterans who, at the time of application, indicate they are homeless.
2. **General.** The issue of homelessness in America continues to be a national concern. VA (Department of Veterans Affairs) is aware of and concerned about the plight of the Nation's homeless veterans. In an effort to ensure that homeless veterans are awarded VA benefits as expeditiously as possible, procedures are established by this circular to enact reduced claims processing times to afford homeless veterans a better opportunity to attain reintegration into society.
3. **Responsibilities**
 - a. **VA Regional Office management will:**
 - (1) Ensure that all claims initiated by homeless veterans are processed within a maximum of 30 calendar days from receipt on station.
 - (2) Require that each division provide control and assume responsibility for expedited processing of homeless veterans' claims ;
 - (3) Ensure that the requirements of 38 CFR 1.710 are facilitated;
 - (4) Establish effective coordination between the VARO (Regional Office), VAMC's (VA Medical Centers), VAMC SWS (Social Work Service) and MAS (Medical Administration Service) within the RO's jurisdiction. An effective working relationship is imperative to ensure that holistic services are provided to homeless claimants and appropriate contact and referral points are established for use by VSD and Adjudication to aid in the processing of homeless veterans' claims.
 - b. **Veterans Services Divisions will:**
 - (1) Assist veterans identified as homeless in completing and filing VA claims. In addition to filing an application for benefits, SF (Standard Form) 180, Request Pertaining to Military Records, must be completed, signed by the veteran and attached to all applications if the claimant is unable to present or submit valid verification of military service. The VBC (Veterans Benefits Counselor) will indicate the following notation on the SF 180: HOMELESS VETERAN/VA CLAIM PENDING.

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- (a) Overcome homeless veteran resistance to applying for benefits. The VBC will strive to overcome such resistance by motivation and referral to specialized community service providers or VA SWS and counseling services for further assistance.
- (b) Advise homeless veterans of the general claims processing times and the importance of remaining in contact with VA. This is significantly crucial in those instances where the homeless veteran has applied for disability compensation or pension benefits in order that follow-up action or a required physical examination can be completed. Every effort should be made to ensure that the veteran has a temporary residence and agrees to maintain contact with the VARO and VAMC's SWS/MAS representative, until the claim is finalized. Local procedures should be established to formalize a network of referral between the RO and VAMC SWS/MAS representatives to ensure an effective relationship between the veteran and VA.
- (2) Establish a mailing address for the claimant. Under no circumstances can a claim be denied because the claimant does not provide a mailing address. Provisions of 38 CFR 1.710 and Circular 20-88-21 will apply.
- (3) Contact the nearest VAMC SWS/MAS representative and advise the designated homeless social/case worker of the referral of a homeless veteran who has applied for benefits. Indicate on the benefit application or on an attached Optional Form 41, Routing and Transmittal Slip, the VAMC's SWS/MAS representative's name and telephone number. NOTE: SWS/MAS (or Medical Center point of contact as determined by MAS) will be the designated receipt point for all requests for disability compensation or pension examinations and follow-up actions required for claims processing.
- (4) Establish initial controls upon completion or receipt of applications for benefits initiated by homeless veterans. An application will be identified as a "SPECIAL" claim and the following will be indicated on the top of each application: **HOMELESS VETERAN/EXPEDITED PROCESSING REQUIRED.**
- (5) Handcarry properly noted application to the designated Adjudication liaison person within 1 day from the date claim is received in VSD.
- (6) Contact the veteran and/or VA SWS/MAS contact point to obtain additional information for claims processing upon receipt of notification from Adjudication and, if appropriate, when the claim has been finalized.

c. Adjudication Divisions will:

- (1) Establish internal controls on all claims identified as being filed by homeless veterans.

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- (2) Review applications to determine if sufficient information is presented to support the granting of benefits. If no further development is necessary, and a current rating is of record, take action to award benefits within 5 workdays from the date the application was received in Adjudication.
- (3) Prepare VA Form 21-2507, Request for Physical Examination, if the veteran's claim for disability compensation or pension lacks the required medical evidence. Forward the examination request to the VA SWS/MAS homeless coordinator as indicated on the application or attached OF 41. The method of referral between the VARO and the VAMC will be determined locally through coordination with the VAMC MAS. The preferred method for transmittal of examination requests between the VARO and the VAMC is via FAX or daily messenger to ensure expeditious handling. Annotate the VA Form 21-2507 with the following: **EXPEDITED PROCESSING REQUESTED/CLAIM PENDING FOR HOMELESS VETERAN.**
- (4) When verified service is not of record or shown in BIRLS (Beneficiary Identification Records Locator System), telefax immediately to NPRC (National Personnel Records Center) the SF 180 as a request for service verification. (NOTE: Prior to initiating a FAX request to NPRC, ensure that basic eligibility for the benefit claimed is shown. NPRC has indicated that the method of request and delivery of information via FAX can only be accommodated in instances where VA authority has validated the urgency of claims processing and basic eligibility is shown. This procedure is limited to processing of claims for homeless veterans only.) Indicate on the SF 180 the following: **HOMELESS VETERAN/VA CLAIM PENDING** and ensure that the RO's address is indicated as the sender's address in Item 7. The VA on-site representative at NPRC will FAX service verification to the requesting RO within 2 weeks. Service medical records will be mailed to the identified RO within 2 weeks in those instances where the RO specifically indicated a compensation claim is pending. The RO should include a VAF 21-3101, Request for Information, with their transmission to NPRC if service medical records are required to adjudicate the claim. In addition, NPRC will forward to the RO a confirmation letter and "hard copy" of the service verification which will bear the NPRC seal within 30 days from the date of VA's initial request. **NPRC FAX number is: (314) 538-4898.**
- (5) Refer the case to VSD if additional information is required to complete processing of a claim. If contact cannot be made with the veteran and information obtained within 2 workdays, VSD will return the case to adjudication. In those instances where additional information is required to effectively process the claim and VSD's efforts were unsuccessful, a claims development letter will be forwarded to the claimant's address of record. VSD will use VA Form 119, Report of Contact, to document all attempts to locate the homeless veteran, contacts with VAMC SWS/MAS and other actions related to the processing of the claim. VAF 119 will be maintained in the claims folder to substantiate all actions.

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Note: If it is determined that additional evidence is required and it is unattainable because the veteran abandoned the claim, VA Form 119 will be so documented and the claims examiner should take action to disallow the claim. Do not disallow a claim until all means of locating the veteran have been exhausted and a minimum of 60 days has expired since the initial development letter was mailed.

(6) Immediately forward the case to the rating board upon receipt of all evidence, i.e., the results of the requested physical examination and any required FAX copy of the veteran's service verification.

(7) Action will be completed by the rating board on claims initiated by homeless veterans within 3 workdays of receipt. The rating board member must clearly identify the proposed rating decision or denial as follows: **HOMELESS VETERAN/EXPEDITED PROCESSING REQUIRED** to ensure expedited transcription and processing by the CTA (Central Transcription Activity). Dictation should be submitted to CTA using the highest priority available from the system used at each regional office.

(8) Upon completion of rating actions by the rating board, action will be taken within 2 workdays to award or deny benefits. All requests for transcription forwarded to the CTA must be identified in the same manner as indicated for rating decisions.

(9) Notify VSD of the date award or denial action was accomplished.

(10) Upon receipt of a request from a VA medical facility, HMCI (Homeless Mentally Chronically III) or Domiciliary Program to verify service for homeless veterans, Adjudication will FAX to NPRC the SF 180 as a request for service verification. Note: VA Form 10-7131, Exchange of Beneficiary Information and Request for Administrative and Adjudicative Action, must be accompanied by a SF 180 which was completed and signed by the homeless veteran. Indicate on the SF 180 the following: **HOMELESS VETERAN/VA CLAIM PENDING** and ensure that the RO's address is indicated as the sender's address in Item 7.

d. Administrative Division will ensure that all rating decisions, correspondence and other documents, identified as "priority" typing for homeless veterans benefit claims and forwarded to the CTA, are transcribed in accordance with established/current control procedures and returned to the office of jurisdiction.

4. Questions. Refer any questions regarding VSD procedures to Central Office, Veterans Assistance Service, FTS 373-6657.

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Refer any questions regarding Adjudication procedures to Central Office, Compensation and Pension Service, FTS 373-3511.

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Chief Benefits Director

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DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Veterans Benefits Administration
Washington DC 20420

September 9, 2002

VBA Letter 20-02-34

Director (00)
All VA Regional Offices and Centers

SUBJ: Homeless Veterans Outreach and Claims Processing – Public Law 107-95

Purpose

This letter contains information and instructions for all regional offices to improve Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) outreach to homeless veterans as required by recent legislation.

Background

Public Law 107-95 (Homeless Veterans Comprehensive Assistance Act of 2001) was enacted in December 2001.

This law impacts VBA and the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). The law requires VBA to improve both outreach and claims processing for homeless veterans, and incorporates accountability mechanisms. VBA is significantly affected by three sections of the law.

- Section 2003(a) requires that at least one full time employee be assigned to oversee and coordinate homeless veterans programs at each of the 20 regional offices with the largest homeless veteran population.
- Section 2022 requires coordination of outreach services by VA to veterans at risk of homelessness.
- Section 2065(d) requires a benefits content to VA's annual report to Congress.

Public Law 107-95 also created a new 38 USC chapter – "CHAPTER 20 - BENEFITS FOR HOMELESS VETERANS." The law consolidated other 38 USC sections relating to benefits and services for homeless veterans into chapter 20.

Full Time Homeless Veterans Outreach Coordinators

Enclosure A contains information on the designation of 20 regional offices (RO), and implementation of full time homeless veterans outreach coordinators (HVOC). This new requirement is not intended to obviate current homeless veterans outreach programs and staffing at any RO whether or not funded by VHA. HVOCs from the remaining 37 ROs should become familiar with the information in Enclosure A as it may improve the effectiveness of their outreach to homeless veterans.

Homeless Veteran Claims Processing Control and Reports

Enclosure B contains instructions for RO control and reports for homeless veteran claims processing activities. The required information collected in these reports will be used for VBA's annual report to Congress. The reports are required from all ROs.

References

- 38 USC 7722 (Outreach services)
- 38 CFR 1.710 (Homeless claimants: Delivery of benefit payments and correspondence)
- M21-1, Part VII, 6.06 (Homeless Veteran Outreach)
- VBA Circular 20-91-9 (Procedures for Processing Claims for Homeless Veterans)
- VBA Circular 27-91-4 (Outreach to Homeless Veterans)
- COIN DOOR Report 7008 (Homeless Activity)

The overall procedures outlined in M21-1 and the VBA circulars are still in effect. Significant requirements are that all ROs designate a Homeless Veterans Outreach Coordinator (M21-1, Part VII, 6.06); specially label, control and expedite processing of homeless veteran claims (VBA Circular 20-91-1); and report on outreach activities in DOOR (VBA Circular 27-91-4).

To the extent necessary, the information in the circulars and Public Law 107-95 will be incorporated in appropriate areas of M21-1 which is currently being revised and reorganized.

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Program Oversight

The Veterans Services Staff, Compensation and Pension Service, is responsible for the Homeless Veterans Outreach Program.

List of Homeless Veterans Outreach Coordinators

A list of RO homeless veterans outreach coordinators is maintained on the Outreach page of the Compensation and Pension Service Intranet web site (<http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/bl/21/outreach>). It includes the name, title, and telephone and fax numbers for each HVOC. All ROs must keep its HVOC information up-to-date by informing the Veterans Services Staff of any change. Change notices should be emailed to VAVBAWAS/CO/OUTREACH.

Veterans at Risk of Homelessness

Section 2022 of Public Law 107-95 requires coordination of outreach services for veterans at risk of homelessness (being discharged and released from institutions after inpatient psychiatric care, substance abuse treatment, or imprisonment). VBA involvement with VHA's Mental Health Service and Readjustment Counseling Service is necessary. Compensation and Pension Service will participate with VHA in devising a coordinated plan. Information will be distributed to all HVOCs as soon as the plan is finalized. It will also be posted on the Compensation and Pension Service Intranet web site (<http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/bl/21/outreach>).

Collaboration With VHA

The success of VBA's homeless veterans outreach and claims processing largely depends on close collaboration between RO HVOCs and VHA homeless veterans coordinators. All RO HVOCs will establish and maintain an effective network, open communications, and a referral system with all VHA homeless veterans coordinators in their RO's area of jurisdiction.

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Questions

Questions on this subject should be directed to the Compensation and Pension Service
Outreach mailbox: VAVBAWAS/CO/OUTREACH

/s/

Daniel L. Cooper
Under Secretary for Benefits

Enclosures (2)

Full Time Homeless Veterans Outreach Coordinators

Designated Regional Offices

By October 1, 2002, the following regional offices (RO) must have a *full time* homeless veterans outreach coordinator (HVOC) in place.

Atlanta	Houston	New York	Seattle
Boston	Indianapolis	Oakland	St. Louis
Chicago	Los Angeles	Philadelphia	St. Petersburg
Cleveland	Nashville	Phoenix	Waco
Detroit	Newark	Roanoke	Winston-Salem

These ROs are designated because their jurisdictions have the highest veteran populations according to the latest veteran population statistics from the "Geographic Distribution of VA Expenditures for FY 2001." The Homeless Veterans Program Staff, Office of the Secretary, concurs with the designations.

Although the designation of one full-time HVOC at each of the 20 ROs will meet the legislative requirement, that does not lessen RO responsibility for effective outreach to homeless veterans. It is recognized that more than one full time equivalent employee for homeless veterans outreach may be employed at some ROs.

Position Descriptions

Position Descriptions for the 20 full time HVOCs must contain, but are not limited to, the following itemized requirements outlined in section 2003(a) of P.L. 107-95.

Oversight and coordination of homeless veterans programs including

- housing programs administered by the Secretary under this title or any other provision of the law,
- compensation, pension, vocational rehabilitation, and education benefits programs administered by the Secretary under 38 USC or any other provision of the law,
- the housing program for veterans supported by the Department of Housing and Urban Development,
- the homeless veterans reintegration program of the Department of Labor under section 2021 of 38 USC (Homeless veterans reintegration programs),

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Enclosure A

- the programs under section 2033 of 38 USC (Additional services at certain locations),
- the assessments required by section 2034 of 38 USC (Coordination with other agencies and organizations), and
- such other programs relating to homeless veterans as may be specified by the Secretary.

Other than the responsibilities outlined in Public Law 107-95, overall responsibilities of the 20 full-time HVOCs may differ. That could be caused by variances in the local geographic area of jurisdiction, distribution of the homeless veteran population, base work site of the HVOC, total homeless veterans outreach workload, and other factors. For those reasons, each of the 20 designated ROs must devise its own full time HVOC position description.

Training

The 20 designated full time HVOCs will have varying degrees of experience in homeless veterans outreach. HVOC training needs should be assessed by each of the 20 ROs. Where training is needed, all locally available resources should be sought. Local VHA homeless veterans outreach and treatment staff may be able to assist. Compensation and Pension Service will distribute helpful information and materials to *all* HVOCs as they become available. The information will also be posted on the Compensation and Pension Service Intranet web site (<http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/bl/21/outreach>). The 20 full time HVOCs should immediately familiarize themselves with P.L. 107-95 and the other references outlined in the cover letter of this document.

Report

Each of the 20 designated regional offices must inform the Compensation and Pension Service when its full-time HVOC has been established. The information should be emailed to VAVBAWAS/CO/OUTREACH. If the full time HVOC is other than a person previously designated as the office's HVOC, be sure to furnish complete information as outlined in the cover letter of this document.

Claims Processing Control and Reports

Control Log

Homeless veteran claims processing control is crucial to the success of VBA's contribution to the annual report to Congress. To assure total control of homeless veteran compensation and pension claims, all such claims must be registered on a claims processing activities control log before further claims processing actions are taken.

The control log can be found on the Outreach/Homeless Veterans Program page of the Compensation and Pension Service Intranet web site (<http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/bl/21/outreach/Home/index.htm>). It is a formatted Excel spreadsheet that must be used by all regional offices (ROs) because of Central Office's need to consolidate RO reports as outlined below. The log calls for veteran identification, type of claim, receipt date, completion date, and disposition information.

VBA Circular 20-91-9 has required some form of local control on homeless veteran claims processing. The Excel control log standardizes that control mechanism.

A person or entity at each regional office must be responsible for maintaining the control log. At some ROs, the homeless veterans outreach coordinator (HVOC) may be the best conduit for this function, but not necessarily at others.

All homeless veteran compensation and pension claims received on or after October 1, 2002, must be entered on the control log regardless of how the claims are received at the RO. Therefore, it is important that all RO employees be made aware of the designated control person or entity to which new homeless veteran claims must first be given. Claims received prior to October 1, 2002, should not be included on the control log.

Claims Folder Flash

In order to keep the control log up-to-date, the control person or entity must be informed when each homeless veteran's claim is finalized. Each claims folder must be flashed with a notice that the folder must be routed to the control person or entity when claims processing is complete. Once the final disposition information is entered on the control log, the folder should be returned for filing or other appropriate destination.

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Enclosure B

Reports

Because of the new requirements for claims processing data in VBA's contribution to VA's annual report to Congress, all ROs must send the Excel control log introduced above to Compensation and Pension Service. To be clear, the RO reports will be the monthly submission of the control log.

The report (control log) will be due on the 5th calendar day of each month or the next workday if the 5th falls on a weekend or holiday. Each month's report will be cumulative to include all homeless veteran claims received beginning on October 1, 2002. The first report will be due on November 5, 2002.

This special claims processing report for homeless veterans is temporary. When Central Office is able to independently extract the required data from centralized sources, this requirement will be discontinued.

Monthly DOOR input of the following statistical data on homeless veteran outreach is still required:

- WID 7537.01 (HOMELESS-SHELTER CONTACTED) - The number of shelters for the homeless contacted during the month.
- WID 7537.02 (HOMELESS-AGENCIES CONTACTED) - The number of related community support or social service agencies contacted during the month.
- WID 7537.03 (HOMELESS-REFERED-HCMI AND DOL PROGRAMS) - The number of veterans referred to and from the Homeless Chronically Mentally Ill (HCMI) program and the Department of Labor (DOL) Jobs for Homeless program during the month.
- WID 7537.04 (HOMELESS-# SEEKING ASSISTANCE FROM RO) - The number of homeless seeking assistance from the regional office during the month. Include personal and telephone contacts