

PROJECT MANAGEMENT PLAN (PMP)

SECTION 1 - OVERVIEW

This document describes a project under consideration for national deployment by the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and is being monitored by the Compensation and Pension (C&P) Service Business Process Re-engineering (BPR) Implementation Program staff. This Project Management Plan (PMP) describes the activities, controls, and processes needed for effective management of the Pre-Discharge Development, Examination, and Rating Project.

1.1 Project Identification

1.1.1 *Project Description:*

Through this initiative, the VBA will assist active duty personnel in filing claims for compensation, gather necessary evidence for disability compensation claims, and in cooperation with the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and the service branches conduct pre-discharge examinations. These examinations must be conducted in accordance with VA examination protocols which are useful for both VA and Department of Defense (DoD) purposes. The claims will be rated close to the date of separation from service, thus resulting in a great reduction in the number of days necessary to process an original claim.

VBA is currently engaged in a significant re-engineering of the claims process. As part of the redesigned service delivery vision, the pre-discharge development, examination, and rating process has been developed as an essential element of service delivery. In the new vision, VBA intends to decide and, where possible, notify separating service persons of their disability claims based on pre-discharge development and examinations.

VA needs an examination which provides information necessary for determining the degree of disability to rate claims for service-connected disability compensation. In addition, DoD requires an examination which determines fitness for active duty. This initiative will reduce the taxpayers' expense to the cost of one examination for both purposes. In the initiative, veterans claims will be taken and developed, disability examinations will be performed, and rating actions will be prepared prior to discharge from service. The initiative will result in veterans receiving compensation benefits more quickly and will reduce the number of days necessary to process an original claim.

1.1.2 Project Name:

Pre-Discharge Development, Examination, and Rating Project

1.1.3 Project Identification Number: WD-02

1.1.4 Project Contact List:

Contact List - Pre-Discharge Development, Examination and Rating Project				
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As of 5/29/98.

1.2 Project Requirements

In 1993, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) conducted a 2-month study of the adequacy of Navy and Marine Corps service separation examinations for rating purposes in accordance with the requirements of the Schedule for Rating Disabilities (38 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) part 4). The study found that about 75% of those examination reports were inadequate for rating purposes because they did not provide the information required.

In 1994, VBA and Veterans Health Administration (VHA) representatives met with DoD with support from the House Armed Services and Veterans Affairs Committees to discuss service separations and the VA Rating Schedule requirements for evaluating disabilities. VA provided DoD with a copy of the examination protocols contained in the *Physician's Guide to Disability Evaluations*.

In May 1995, the assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs provided DD Form 2697 to all service branches to be used to record medical information just prior to separation or retirement of service members. The covering memorandum indicated that prior to discharge each service member will be given a medical interview using the form. The interview will be conducted by a credentialed health care professional to document any complaints or potential service-related (incurred or aggravated) illness or injury. The memorandum indicated that any separating or retiring service member who desires a complete physical examination is entitled to receive such an examination.

A pilot test evaluation of pre-discharge examinations was conducted in cooperation with the Army in Seattle-Ft. Lewis, Waco-Ft. Hood, and Louisville-Ft. Knox. The pilot test was concluded on 7/7/97 and the Final Report on the Evaluation of the Separation Examination Test was prepared by the Management Decision and Research Center (MDRC) on 9/8/97.

The pilot test demonstrated the feasibility of assisting active duty personnel in filing a claim for compensation, conducting physical examinations in accordance with VA examination protocols prior to discharge from active duty, and obtaining service medical records and other evidence necessary for adjudication purposes. Such evidence includes dependency data and information concerning military severance pay or retired pay, if provided to the separatee. Those claims were rated shortly after service separation, thus resulting in a great reduction in the average number of days necessary to process an original claim.

Each of the pilot test sites is working with the Army to continue cooperation after the test to develop claims, examine disabilities and prepare ratings prior to or close to the dates of discharge.

In the Seattle area, service medical records and claims support information are obtained from Ft. Lewis, and physicians from VAMC American Lake conduct the examinations. In cooperation with VAMC Puget Sound and VAMC Spokane, the Seattle office has expanded their operation with Ft. Lewis to include additional separation sites, specifically with Air Force and Naval bases located in the State of Washington. This includes McChord and Fairchild Air Force Bases, Bremerton Naval Complex, Bangor Naval Submarine Base, and Everett Naval Station. Thus far, Seattle has rated over 2,000 claims in the pre-discharge effort with only one appeal.

Cooperation between VAMC Louisville, VARO Louisville, and Ft. Knox has allowed pre-discharge development, examinations, and rating actions to continue since the end of the pilot test. As in the Separation Examination Test, part of the exam has been performed at Ft. Knox and the balance at VAMC Louisville. Two Veterans Service Representatives (VSRs) are now based at Ft. Knox where they promote the pre-discharge examination program and provide application assistance. Since June 1997, there have been 265 participants in the examination program and 66 ratings have been promulgated. In the near future, VAMC Louisville will be placing examiners at the Ft. Knox Ireland Army Hospital to conduct the examinations. The regional office will also be placing a rating specialist and an authorizer at that facility. It is planned to have all pre-discharge actions from application to authorization to be performed at Ft. Knox.

There has been similar continuing cooperation between VAMC Temple, VARO Waco, and Ft. Hood. The pilot test terminated in October 1996. Since the test the pre-discharge examinations have been conducted at VAMC Temple rather than at Ft. Hood. A Military Services Coordinator (MSC) is permanently assigned to Ft. Hood. The MSC gives briefings and assists servicepersons in filing compensation applications. VAMC Temple assigned a scheduling clerk to Ft. Hood. The Scheduling Clerk requests the examination. A complete package with the service medical records, DD214, and pre-discharge examination is then mailed to the regional office where the rating is done. The first examination at Temple was on 11/1/96. Since that time through the first quarter of FY 98, there have been 669 claims finalized with an average cumulative processing time of 34.7 days. Effective 2/9/98, the regional office placed a rating specialist at Ft. Hood. The rating specialist will rate cases there.

There is also cooperation between VARO Chicago, VAMC North Chicago, and the Great Lakes Naval Training Center in which all necessary medical and administrative information is gathered for separating sailors and VA protocol examinations are conducted prior to discharge. On the day of separation, their disability ratings are signed and awards authorized. The VA/Great Lakes Training Center Pre-discharge Claims Processing Team was presented a Hammer award the week of August 25, 1997, for their effort.

VARO San Diego and the Marine base at Camp Pendleton have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to initiate similar cooperation. Under that agreement, Navy physicians are presently conduct the examinations using military examination protocols. However, VAMC San Diego has been requested to provide a physician to assist with the examinations at the base and they will use the VA examination protocols in the future. The San Diego office has outbased 3 rating specialists and 2 other claims process personnel at Camp Pendleton where the claims are rated.

VARO Roanoke is also cooperating with the Norfolk area Naval facilities to develop similar cooperation. A rating specialist located at the Naval base will review claims for compensation and request examinations as part of the discharge exam by Navy doctors. The rating specialist will then prepare rating decisions based on review of the service medical records, and the separation examinations. VHA medical facilities are not involved with the Norfolk initiative.

An MOU has been signed by VARO Lincoln and Offutt Air Force Base for pre-discharge claims development and examinations. The Air Force agreed to conduct the examinations using VA examination protocols. Starting on 2/9/98, the regional office located a GS 10 VSR in the separation and retirement office at the base. He is assisting in filing claims, and requesting examinations. The outbased VSR will get the service medical records and completed examination report and forward them to the regional office for pre-discharge rating action.

VBA, VHA, and the Navy are now working out details of a test of examining sailors being discharged subsequent to a Physical Evaluation Board. The test will involve individuals discharged though a PEB following a medical evaluation Board at Lemoore Naval Air Station (NAS) and at the Jacksonville NAS as well as other separating service personnel filing a claim for VA compensation. The St. Petersburg regional office has been provided office space at three Jacksonville area Naval bases. VHA is to contract with the Navy to conduct the examinations using VA protocols. The Jacksonville test is expected to begin May 1, 1998. VAMC Fresno is developing an MOU with the Lemoore NAS for the conduct of the examinations.

A test of contract examinations is being developed and will be initiated in April 1998. VBA is contracting for the examinations and VHA medical facilities will not be involved. The military test sites are Forts Benning, Gordon, Stewart, Bragg, Leavenworth, Riley and McConnell Air Force Base.

The September 1996, *Re-Engineering Claims Processing: A Case for Change*, indicated that a strategic goal of re-engineering is to reduce the time to process claims and that a reduction in the average number of days to complete an original claim would be the performance measure. A visible component of the

core problem of inadequate communications and outreach would be addressed by expansion of the pre-discharge service medical examination program.

1.3 Project Overview

The period prior to discharge from service is a unique one for VA claims purposes. During this time, all records necessary for the evaluation of an original disability compensation claim are available in one place. No external development is necessary as it would be if the claim were not filed until after discharge. The Veterans Benefits Administration is striving to make it a routine business practice to take and develop claims, perform examinations, and prepare ratings prior to separation from active duty at military service separation sites. These sites include Norfolk, San Diego, Chicago, Seattle, San Antonio, and other major locations inside the United States where the bulk of (DoD) separations occur.

This initiative will expand the assistance in filing VA compensation claims, development of evidence, performance of physical examinations, and rating claims of service members prior to discharge from military service. It will involve the 20 largest military separation points (where 64 percent of separations occurred in FY 1997) and those located near (within 60 miles) VBA regional offices (where another 21 percent of separations occur) in the continental USA. This initiative will allow veterans to file for and receive benefits more quickly and will significantly reduce the average number of days necessary to process an original claim.

Sampling has shown that 50 percent of original claims for compensation are received within the year after discharge. VBA has a goal to develop claims, perform examinations, and prepare rating decisions for 80 percent of those claims, or 40 percent of all original claims prior to discharge.

Project Process: We will use the results of the recently concluded Separation Examination Test as reported in the *Final Report on the Evaluation of the Separation Examination Test of 9/8/97*.

The initiative will involve the 20 largest military separation points. In each of those sites, initiatives will be developed locally in conjunction with the VA regional offices (VAROs) and medical centers (VAMCs) in those areas. Regional and Area offices will develop pre-discharge examination and claims processing proposals which they will submit to VBA. They will consider the feasibility of setting up VBA claims processing offices at military bases to include personnel to develop claims, request examinations, rate claims, and adjudicate them. They will also identify those separation points where there is close proximity to a VBA regional office or VHA medical facility (within 60 miles) so the

Future Claims Process: With complete development prior to discharge of all evidence (medical, dependency, and separation pay information) necessary to adjudicate a claim, the delays involved in awaiting such evidence subsequent to discharge will be eliminated. At the end of FY 1997, the average processing time for original claims was 133 days. The Florida Pilot Test demonstrated that test group participants claims were authorized an average of 42 days after release from active duty.

The goals of this project are:

1. Reduce the time needed to obtain service medical records
2. Increase customer satisfaction as indicated by customer satisfaction surveys
3. Reduce processing time for original claims

1.4 Document Overview

This PMP establishes the overall framework for successful accomplishment of the task areas. It also provides task specific schedules for individual tasks within the task areas. The PMP is organized into 6 sections, as follows:

Section 1 - Overview. Presents background information relevant to the project and the document, identifies the plan for developing and updating this document, and places the document in the context of other plans that may be produced for the project.

Section 2 - Project Management. Presents the project management approach to be used in the project. It describes the project resources and organization; the project schedule, milestones and deliverables; the approach to risk management; the types and frequency of formal reviews; the corrective action process to be used on the project; the mechanisms for problem reporting, and the types of metrics to be collected and reported.

Additionally this section defines the requirements of the project. The requirements are based on guidance and direction received from VA (VBA and VHA) and SRA management.

Section 3 - Acceptance Criteria. Provides the criteria which must be met in order to determine a successful conclusion of the project.

Section 4 - Quality Assurance (QA). Provides a brief overview of the QA objectives, process, and roles and responsibilities. A QA Plan will be