DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Veterans Benefits Administration
Washington DC 20420

FEB 23

VBA Letter 20-00-9

Directors (00)
VA Regional Offices and Centers

In Reply Refer To:

SUBJ: 2000 Seat Belt Survey

1. The enclosed memorandum from the Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration (006), transmits information and instructions regarding the annual reporting requirements for seat belt use while on official business. Please review the memorandum and:

- Ensure that a representative sample of your station's employees who operate or ride in a motor vehicle while on official business complete the on-line survey no later than February 29, 2000.

- Notify the Office of Facilities Management (201) when your station has complied with the reporting requirements. Please e-mail this notification to VAVBAWAS/CO242C.

2. Questions may be referred to Joe Lepp, Office of Facilities Management (201), at (202) 273-7122.

Patrick Nappi

Enclosure

Department of Veterans Affairs

Memorandum

Date: February 15, 2000

From: Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration (006)

Subj: 2000 Seat Belt Survey

To: See addressees below

1. On April 16, 1997, President Clinton issued Executive Order 13043, *Increasing Seat Belt Use in the United States*, requiring Federal agencies to report on seat belt use among Federal employees traveling (as a driver or passenger) in seat belt equipped motor vehicles while on official business[1]. Attached to this memorandum is the annual seat belt survey from the Department of Transportation, which has been charged by the President with coordinating this effort.

2. In order to meet the reporting requirements of Executive Order 13043, please have a representative sample of employees who operate or ride in a motor vehicle on official VA business complete the DOT electronic survey document available at the following Internet address by Tuesday, February 29, 2000[2]: http://www.va.gov/vasafety. Survey results will be recorded and tallied by DOT's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. This process has been presented by DOT to reduce the administrative burden on reporting agencies. DOT estimates that survey completion requires only 10 minutes.

3. It is VA policy that all employees wear their seat belt when operating or riding in motor vehicles. Last year's survey reported the VA overall driver seat belt rate at 95 percent (out of 846 total observations) and the seat belt rate for passengers at 73 percent (out of 74 total observations). We are hopeful that VA will exceed these percents this year.

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[1] Official business is defined as those times when employees are traveling either locally during the workday or on travel status in a personal vehicle, taxi, airport van or other mode of ground transportation. This survey does not address commuting or other instances of personal travel. *Source: Department of Transportation.*

[2] All responses will be strictly confidential and will be aggregated and used in Department of Transportation reports to the President and to Congress.

See addressees below

4. If you require additional information, please contact John Hancock on (202) 273-9742. Thank you for your assistance in meeting this requirement and for contributing to a safer Federal workforce.

Eugene A. Brickhouse

Attachments

Addressees:
Deputy Under Secretary for Health (10)
Under Secretary for Benefits (20)
Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs (40)

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Veterans Benefits Administration
Washington, DC 20420

MAR 16 2000

VBA Letter 20-00-10

Director (00)
All Regional Offices and Centers

SUBJ: Joint VR&E / VETS / SESAs Training

1. VA's Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment Service (VR&E), the Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS), and State Employment Security Agencies (SESAs) will once again conduct joint training seminars to improve their working relationships in assisting vocational program participants to acquire employment. All the seminars will be held at the Doubletree Hotel in Denver , Colorado and Central Office will be paying for the travel and per diem costs for VR&E staff for this initiative. The use of government cars is encouraged whenever possible.

2. VA, VETS, and the University of Colorado's National Veterans' Training Institute (NVTI) have developed a "Train the Trainer" course based on the principles of the VETS/VR&E Partnership Operating Guide. The purpose of this two and a half day seminar is to develop training teams composed of staff from both VA ,VETS, and SESA to instruct staff at the local level on how to improve job placement for Chapter 31 clients without duplication, fragmentation, or delay.

3. Each Regional Office VR&E Officer will nominate one VR&E staff member to participate in the training. Candidates should be selected based on the following: 1) familiarity with the workings and relationship between VR&E, VETS, and SESA at the local level, 2) (preferably have) experience as either a trainer or facilitator, and 3) acting as an equal partner in the "team concept" of training , the VR&E participants agree to develop and implement , with their counterparts from the other agencies, a local training agenda that will ensure that all local staff who work with Chapter 31 clients are trained within two months of the "Train the Trainer" course. Please notify Mr. Kim Graham via E-mail of your nomination within 5 business days. Nominations should include **name, duty title, office location, and telephone number**.

4. Please review the attached training schedule. Each seminar is scheduled for 2 ½ days ending at 2 P.M. on the third day with return travel to be completed later that day or early the next day. Monday of each seminar week is the planned initial travel day. Should conflicts arise, Tuesday will be designated as the initial travel day. The University of Colorado's International Training Academy (ITA) will book rooms for all attendees. Additional information concerning travel and hotel arrangements will be provided when your response is received. If you have any questions, please contact Mr. Graham via E-mail or by calling (202) 273-7415.

Patrick Nappi
Deputy Under Secretary for Operations

Enclosure

CLASS #1
March 27 (travel) thru March 30 (travel pm)

	VARO	STATE	DOL	Total VA/DOL Participants
Team #1	Philadelphia	PA		2
Team #2	NYC/Buffalo	NY	REG II	4
Team #3	Newark	NJ		2
Team #4	Hartford	CT		2
Team #5	Manchester	NH		2
Team #6	White River Jct	VT	REG I	3
Team #7	Providence	RI		2
Team #8	Boston	MA		2
Team #9	Togus	ME		2
				21 TOTAL

CLASS #2
April 10 (travel) thru April 13 (travel pm)

Team #10	Wilmington	DE		2
Team #11	Roanoke	VA	REG III	3
Team #12	Pittsburgh Huntington	WV		3
Team #13	Baltimore Washington	MD DC		4
Team #14	Phoenix	AZ		2
Team #15	Oakland Los Angeles San Diego	CA	REG IX	5
				19 TOTAL

CLASS #3
April 25 (travel) thru April 28 (travel pm)

Team #16	Portland	OR		2
Team #17	Honolulu	HI		2
Team #18	Anchorage	AK		2
Team #19	Houston Waco	TX	REG VI	4
Team #20	Muskogee	OK		2
Team #21	New Orleans	LA		2
Team #22	St. Louis	MO		2
Team #23	Little Rock	AR		2
Team #24	Jackson	MS		2
				20 TOTAL

CLASS #4
May 22 (travel) thru May 25 (travel pm)

Team #25	Chicago	IL		2
Team #26	Milwaukee	WI		2
Team #27	St. Paul Fargo	MN ND		4
Team #28	Detroit	MI	REG V	3
Team #29	Des Moines	IA		2
Team #30	Indianapolis	IN		2
Team #31	Cleveland	OH		2
Team #32	St. Petersburg	FL		2
Team #33	Louisville	KY		2
				21 TOTAL

CLASS #5
May 30 (travel) thru June 2 (travel pm)

Team #34	Atlanta	GA	REG IV	3
Team #35	Montgomery	AL		2
Team #36	Nashville	TN		2
Team #37	Winston-Salem	NC		2
Team #38	Columbia	SC		2
Team #39	San Juan	PR		2
Team #40	Denver	CO	REG VIII	3
Team #41	Cheyenne	WY		2
Team #42	SLC	UT		2
				20 TOTAL

CLASS #6
June 12 (travel) thru June 15 (travel pm)

Team #43	Ft. Harrison	MT		2
Team #44	Boise	ID		2
Team #45	Seattle	WA	REG X 3	
Team #46	Lincoln	NB	REG VII	3
Team #47	Reno	NV		2
Team #48	Wichita	KS		2
Team #49	Sioux Falls	SD		2
Team #50	Albuquerque	NM		2
				18 TOTAL

Participant Totals: VA (57) State (52)Region (10)

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Veterans Benefits Administration
Washington DC 20420

MAR 21 2000

In Reply Refer To:

VBA Letter 20-00-11

Director (00)
All VA Regional Offices and Centers

SUBJ: Notice to Users on Passwords to VBA's Information Technology Resources

1. The Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Information Technology (005) has issued new guidance regarding the implementation of strengthened access controls for information security (IS) within the Department. These new guidelines were approved in December 1999 by the President's Chief Information Officers' Council. The new policies, "VA IS Account and Password Management" and "Windows NT Enterprise Security" are enclosed.

2. Please note that these new controls are the principal indicators used by the General Accounting Office (GAO) and the Department's Office of Inspector General to measure IS. Each Regional Office and Center Director will be advised by the Hines Benefits Delivery Center (BDC) as to how to implement these policies at a future date. Each local IS Officer, or designated Network Service Center Manager or IRM Chief, will be responsible to brief local end users the intent and implementation of these IT account and password management and enterprise security policies. A standard password change notice to all end users will be included in the release of VBA Menu 1.09. VBA Menu 1.09 will change the way local area network passwords are handled. These new policies will require commitment at all levels within VBA to curtail our vulnerabilities by strengthening our IS and IT resources.

3. In the meantime, should you have any questions please contact James Thompson, Chief, Security Infrastructure Protection Office (20S6), who can be reached on 202 273-7050.

Patrick Nappi
Deputy Under Secretary for Operations

Enclosures (2)

VA INFORMATION SYSTEM ACCOUNT AND PASSWORD MANAGEMENT INTERIM POLICY

Access to information systems resources shall be managed by a combination of technical and administrative controls. These controls apply to general support systems and major applications, whether the systems are managed directly by VA or by others (e.g. contractors) in the interest of VA. Uniform policy for access control across all VA systems and networks is needed to support today's highly inter-connected environment and ensure that weaknesses at one facility do not place all VA information assets at unnecessary risk. These controls will ensure that only authorized individuals gain access to information systems resources, that these individuals are assigned an appropriate level of privilege, and that they are individually accountable for their actions. Following are minimum standards for password and user account management.

1. Access will be controlled and limited based on positive identification and authentication mechanisms.

a. To ensure accountability, all user accounts must be individualized.

b. Controls shall be implemented to require strong passwords. Passwords shall be at least eight characters in length, and contain three of the following four kinds of characters: letters (upper case and lower), numbers, and, characters that are neither letters nor numbers (like "#", "@" or "$").

c. No portion of associated account names shall be used in passwords.

d. Passwords shall be changed no less frequently than every 90 days. Information systems shall not permit re-assignment of the last three passwords used.

e. Accounts that have been inactive for 90 days shall be disabled.

f. To preclude password guessing, an intruder lock out feature shall suspend accounts after five invalid attempts to log on. Where round-the-clock system administration service is available, system administrator intervention shall be required to clear a locked account. Where round-the-clock system administration service is not available, accounts shall remained locked out for at least ten minutes.

g. Operating systems, systems software, and other systems at high risk of compromise are sometimes installed with a standard set of default accounts and associated standard passwords. Like all accounts, these access routes must be protected by strong passwords; additional measures, such as disabling, renaming, or decoying these standard accounts, should also be employed.

h. All VA information systems shall have the ability to audit password activity, specifically when and who last changed a password, and when and who last changed account privileges.

i. Systems that cannot meet these minimum standards must be remedied. Until such time as deficient systems are brought up to these security standards, system owners, as part of their OMB mandated A-130 security plans and risk assessments, shall accept in writing any risk to the VA Enterprise.

2. Prior to initial account distribution, positive physical identification of individuals receiving accounts shall be conducted. Positive physical identification can be done by anyone the system administrator can trust to perform such a task. For example, if an employee needs access to a system located off-site, the employee's supervisor could make positive physical identification of the employee, and request access via electronic mail. During the first instance of access with a new account, the initial password must be changed by the individual responsible for the account, in compliance with the password controls defined in this policy.

3. VA system owners shall establish a process to authorize and document access privileges based on a legitimate and demonstrated need to have system access. Access privilege documentation must be maintained in a manner that makes it easily retrievable by individual user account. Individuals will be granted access only to those information resources which are necessary for the job assignment.

4. When systems users are no longer part of an organization, or their duties change, their account access shall be appropriately modified or terminated. Requests to change access privileges must be signed and forwarded to the appropriate security officials by the individual's responsible manager.

5. Systems users shall be trained in their security responsibilities. This shall include orientation training and annual update training.

6. Systems will inform users concerning authorized or appropriate use, either through a network banner, or some other means of frequent notification.

7. System owners shall establish comprehensive access activity monitoring programs to identify and investigate failed access attempts and unusual or suspicious patterns of successful access.

8. System owners shall evaluate account and password management controls periodically to ensure that they are operating effectively.

9. During the course of each year, individual accounts shall be audited to ensure compliance with the minimum standards outlined in this policy.

H:/cio-20s/yr2k/acctpswpol

Windows NT ENTERPRISE Security POLICY

ISSUE: Establish the security policies and procedures to be implemented throughout the VA Windows NT Enterprise network and publish them in an interim directive mandating their implementation.

BACKGROUND: The VA Windows NT Enterprise network provides the operational framework for the VA Enterprise Microsoft Exchange network and a significant portion of the file and print services for VA customers nationwide; in addition, more and more networked medical devices use the Windows NT operating system. By actual practice, development of information security policies for the various servers that comprise the VA Windows NT Enterprise network has been decentralized. Several recent security reviews, however, have highlighted significant security deficiencies that occur repeatedly throughout the VA Windows NT Enterprise. To ensure that the VA Windows NT Enterprise is as secure as possible, it is imperative that VA have a unified NT information security policy.

DISCUSSION: One of the business strengths of the upcoming Microsoft Windows 2000 operating system is the ability to enforce a unified, top-down information security policy. The proposed Windows NT information security policies in this paper will be the basis for that top-down information security policy. However, the VA's migration to Windows 2000 is not expected to be complete for several years, and information security is a material weakness with VA now.

On June 21 - 23, 1999, the VA NT Enterprise Work Group held a conference in VA Central Office to discuss the current VA NT Enterprise, our proposed Windows 2000 architecture and issues relating to the transition between the two. Among the briefings on current Information Technology initiatives at the conference was one on the new VA Information Security Program. This briefing highlighted several NT security deficiencies that had been noted in multiple security reviews at several different VA field stations in recent years. Although the primary purpose of the briefing was to request that the Windows 2000 architecture include a baseline set of information security policies and procedures, the Work Group determined that most of the baseline information security policies could be, and should be, implemented within the current Windows NT Enterprise network. These baseline information security measures include:

Strong password functionality. People tend to select a password that is easily remembered (spouse's name, type of car, name of a family pet). Unfortunately, these passwords are easily hacked. A stronger password uses a mix of character types; within NT, there are four allowable types, upper case letters, lower case letters, numbers and certain special characters (like "!", "#" or "~"). This allows a fairly easy-to-remember password, while substantially increasing the possible combinations that a hacker would have to try in order to hack into the account.

The Microsoft strong password option requires the use of at least three of the four classes of characters; it also inhibits the ability to use a form of the account name in the password. The strong password requirement will apply to all NT accounts, including all local and domain Administrator accounts; all customer accounts, including individual accounts, generic accounts (like "Helpdesk") and transient accounts (like guest, temporary or training accounts); all service accounts and the individual accounts of all system administrators.

Minimum password length. Again, people tend to use the shortest password available. However, the fewer characters in the password, the easier it is to hack. A minimum password length of eight characters is considered an information security "best practice".

Password aging and password history. These are also information security best practices. Commonly accepted information security principles require that passwords be changed every 90 days. In addition, the system should be able to recognize and disallow at least the three most recently used passwords. Only "Administrator" accounts and service accounts may be exempted from password aging. After initial use, these accounts should only be used when absolutely necessary; as a general rule, every system administrator in VA should log on using an individual account with appropriate privileges, rather than using the anonymous "Administrator" account.

Unsuccessful logon attempts. One way for hackers to gain access to a system is to identify a valid account name (logon ID) and then use a software tool to try every possible combination of characters until one is successful. To protect VA's automated resources from such mechanisms, all NT accounts should be locked out after five unsuccessful logon attempts; this provides enough leeway for typographical errors or temporary failure to remember the password without leaving the system vulnerable to a war engine. The VA NT Enterprise Work Group strongly recommends that the account remain locked out until a system administrator unlocks it; if that is not possible, then the account should remain locked out for at least 10 minutes.

Protect the default "Administrator" account. Each NT server and workstation comes with a default Administrator account; this account has full permissions on the local device, and the default Administrator account on a primary domain controller also has full permissions within the domain. Because of the high level of permissions, the Administrator account is a popular target for hackers. The account cannot be deleted, and most privileges cannot be removed from it. To protect it, it should be renamed to something a little less obvious. In addition, once the default Administrator account has been renamed, a decoy Administrator account, with customer-level privileges and a strong password, should be created; logon attempts on this account should be included as part of the intrusion detection monitoring.

Protect the default "Guest" account. Each NT server and workstation comes with a default Guest account that frequently has more privileges than a typical customer account; the default Guest account is one of the common accounts hackers try to exploit, because it usually has an easy password and access to more privileges. The account cannot be deleted or renamed, but it should be disabled at all times unless it is specifically needed for a certain function. Even though it is disabled, it should be protected with a strong password, to prevent hacking if it is accidentally enabled. Please note that the routine use of a guest-type account for visitors is strongly discouraged; if an organization needs such an account, however, it must conform to the same naming convention and strong password policies as all other accounts.

Protect the Security Account Manager. The Security Account Manager (SAM) of an NT domain contains the account and password files for each account. It can only be viewed by designated system administrators for the domain. However, it can be accidentally damaged during certain administrative actions; this could prevent customers from authenticating successfully. For additional protection from accidental damage, the SAM should be encrypted with a System Key.

Mandatory use of anti-virus protection software. In today's environment of evolving virus threats, like the "Melissa" virus, that can be distributed quickly throughout an enterprise, it is essential that every server, firewall and workstation within the VA NT Enterprise network have up-to-date anti-virus protection. It is not enough that the anti-virus protection be loaded one time; it must be updated on a regularly scheduled basis and on an emergency basis, to ensure that it can protect against the newest malicious code.

Eliminate unsecure modem connections. At one time, if a customer needed remote access to network connectivity and the files on the desktop, the only option was 'PC AnyWhere' or a similar product. These software products are inherently unsecure, since they require that the workstation be left powered up and logged on; in addition, they generally require a dedicated modem line. With the availability of Microsoft Remote Access Server (RAS) and other similar products, which provide more secure remote connectivity, this type of connectivity is an unnecessary security vulnerability. In addition, there is generally no need for individual modem access where workstations are connected through a local area network; a centralized modem pool can provide the necessary connectivity at a lower cost. Therefore, the use of individual workstation modems should be discouraged, and the use of such modems for inbound remote access should be prohibited.

RECOMMENDATION: That the CIO Council endorse the following information security policies:

All NT domains VA-wide will use the Microsoft strong password option, requiring three of the four classes of characters, for all NT accounts. In addition, the minimum password length for all NT domains VA-wide will be set to eight characters.

The passwords for all customer accounts and all system administrator accounts must be changed every 90 days, and each domain should "remember" the last three passwords used. Only Administrator accounts and service accounts may be exempted from password aging.

All accounts will be locked out after five unsuccessful logon attempts. Where possible, system administrator intervention will be required to clear a locked account. If system administrator intervention is not possible, the account will be locked out for a minimum of 10 minutes.

The default "Administrator" account on all servers and workstations will be renamed. Where practicable, a decoy Administrator account, with no privileges, will be established for use in intrusion detection monitoring.

The default "Guest" account on all servers and workstations will be disabled. Like all other accounts, the disabled Guest account will have a strong password. Use of Guest-type accounts is strongly discouraged, but, if needed, these accounts must conform to the naming conventions and the strong password policy.

The Security Account Manager (SAM) will be protected using the System Key option.

Use of the most recent anti-virus software updates is mandatory on all servers, firewalls and workstations VA-wide.

Use of unsecure modem connections, particularly in conjunction with software products such as PC AnyWhere, will be discontinued in all cases where more secure remote access is available. In addition, the use of individual workstation modems for inbound remote access is not allowed.

H:/cio-20s/yr2k/winntsecpol

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Veterans Benefits Administration
Washington DC 20420

APR 5 2000

In Reply Refer To: 20T

VBA Letter 20-00-12

Director (00)
All VA Regional Offices and Centers

SUBJ: New WEB-Based Employees Orientation Program

1. We are pleased to announce that a short, easy to use computer-based orientation program for new employees has been approved for VBA use and is now available on the VBA Intranet. This program, called *"New to VA"* provides a brief overview of VA's organization and mission. It will be very useful for new employees throughout VBA. It takes less than a half-hour to review, and I encourage you to use it with all of your new employees. Our thanks to Don Duggan of the Loan Guaranty Service (26A1) for developing it and to Rich Howell of the Office of Information Management (20S31) for assisting in the web-based implementation.

2. Equipment Needed. In order to use this program, workstations must have access to the VBA Intranet using Microsoft Internet Explorer. Additionally, workstations where the *"New to VA"* module will be used must download and install an additional plug-in called *"Authorware Web Player"* from Macromedia. This installation package is available on the VBA Intranet. Your IT staff will have already received instructions on the simple download and installation procedure.

3. Accessing the Program. Once the plug-in has been installed, here is how employees may access the orientation program. The direct link for the application is http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/bl/new-to-va/newtova/va.htm. We plan on making this application available from both the Employee Development and Training (20T) and the Loan Guaranty Service (26) Intranet sites.

4. What Do Directors Need To Do? It is your decision which workstations should have access to this software. I would suggest you make it available on at least one workstation in each division and on all workstations used for training. It

is also suggested that you make this available to your VBA Opportunity employees prior to attending Opportunity programs. Please have your IT personnel install the necessary plug-in on any workstations where you want the employees to have access to this program and encourage its use as part of the orientation of all new employees.

Patrick Nappi
Deputy Under Secretary for Operations

Meenehan Whitla, Greta, VBAVACO

From: VAVBAWAS/CO/20T
Sent: Thursday,April 06,2000 10:41 AM
To: AD/USB Director Dist.; VAVBAPHI/BDCDIR; VAVBAHIN/BDC/DIR
Cc: Timko, Larry, VBAVACO; Perkins, Tyrone, VBAPHILBDC; Keys, Sandra, VBAVACO; Brown, Pamela, VBAVACO; Howell, Richard, VBAVACO
Subject: VBA Letter 20-00-12
Importance: High

The **VBA Letter 20-00-12 dated April 5, 2000** has an incorrect Internet Address listed for reaching the Loan Guaranty Web Page. The correct address is:

http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/bl/26/pick-module.htm

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Veterans Benefits Administration
Washington DC 20420

APR 5 2000

VBA Letter 20-00-13

In Reply Refer To:

Director (00)
All VACO Services and Offices and All Regional Offices and Centers

SUBJ: 2000 Air Force Association Employee of the Year Award

1. The Air Force Association (AFA) invited the Department of Veterans Affairs to submit nominations for the Air Force Association Employee of the Year Award. All VA employees are eligible to apply. The 150,000-member Association is an independent, nonprofit, civilian organization primarily concerned with public understanding and acceptance of the pivotal role a well-equipped and well-trained Air Force plays in the security of the Nation and the relevance of overall American military strength to global peace.

2. Annually, the AFA grants one award to a VA employee or group of VA employees to recognize the many contributions made to the mission of the VA. This award also focuses public attention on the achievements of VA employees in serving American veterans. The program award increases public knowledge and appreciation of the dedication and personal commitment of VA employees to provide competent, courteous and compassionate service to veterans, and encourages VA employees to strive for excellence in their daily work.

3. The winner(s) is awarded a plaque citing the recipient's accomplishments at the AFA National Convention held in Washington, DC, in September 2000.

4. Program information including award criteria, eligibility information, and nomination procedures, as well as VA Form 3496, "Authorization To Release Information," are attached. Appropriate officials must endorse nominations. Organizations may submit an unlimited number of nominations to the Office of Human Resources (20A2), 810 Vermont Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20420, by April 28, 2000. Brochures, illustrations, photographs, etc. are welcomed. For more information concerning AFA, please access the AFA web site: http://www.afa.org/. You may direct questions concerning this announcement to Francene Shelton via e-mail or call on 202-273-5913.

Joseph Thompson
Under Secretary for Benefits

Attachments

2000 Air Force Association Employee of the Year Award Program Information

Award Criteria: AFA grants one award to a VA employee or group of VA employees in recognition of significant contributions to the mission of the VA. It also focuses public attention on the achievements of VA employees in serving America's veterans; increases public knowledge and appreciation of the dedication and personal commitment of VA employees to provide competent, courteous and compassionate service to veterans, and encourages VA employees to strive for excellence in their daily work.

Eligibility of Nominees: All current VA employees are eligible to apply.

Nomination Procedures: Please submit the nomination in typewritten and single-spaced format. The nomination must include a signed VA Form 3496, "Authorization To Release Information," (attached). Nominations must be neat, accurate, and error free. Brochures, photographs, and illustrations, etc. are welcomed. Abbreviations should not be used unless they are familiar terms. Acronyms must be defined the first time they are used or they will be returned to originating organization for correction. Nominations must include the information numbered to correspond with the following:

1. Name, position title, grade of nominee(s).

2. Address, including zip code of Department of Veterans Affairs facility or Central Office element.

3. Description of the specific achievement or service which would qualify the employee(s) for the award. Please include any community involvement or accomplishments that resulted from the nominee's work with veterans.

4. Name and phone number of individual to contact for further information. (Please use commercial phone numbers.)

5. If applicable, list branch of military service employee(s) served in and rank at discharge.

AUTHORIZATION TO RELEASE INFORMATION

Note: The following Privacy Act Addendum, Authorization to Release Information, must be submitted with each nomination. Information is disclosed voluntarily and is used in the selection process and for publicity and related purposes. Not providing all or part of the requested information may result in a nominee not being fully considered.

(CLIP AND ATTACH TO NOMINATION)

Name of Nominee: ____________________

Title/Grade/Pay Plan: ____________________

Organization: ____________________

SSN: __________ Date and Place of Birth: __________

Authorization to Release Information

Except as specified below, all personal information contained in my nomination may be used by the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Air Force Association for promotion and publicity of the 2000 AFA Employee of the Year Award.

Exceptions: (Please specify personal information which you do not want released).

____________________ __________
Signature Date

VA Form 3496
March 2000

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Veterans Benefits Administration
Washington DC 20420

APR 10 2000

VBA Letter 20-00-14

Director (00)
VA Regional Offices and Centers

In Reply Refer To:

SUBJ: Secretary's 20th Annual Olin E. Teague Award

1. We are accepting nominations for the 20th Annual Olin E. Teague Award. This prestigious award recognizes an area of utmost importance to the Department's mission: the rehabilitation and improvement in the quality of life of war-injured veterans.

2. Each nomination must include a comprehensive description of the accomplishment(s) and, at a minimum, address the following: the number of patients/clients actually benefiting, the degree to which the accomplishment(s) affected patients/clients, the degree to which accomplishment(s) could be used by others, the uniqueness of the accomplishment(s), the degree of creativity involved in the development, and the sacrifice demanded of the nominee. In accordance with MP-5, Part I, Chapter 451, Incentive Awards, Appendix B, please state the following:

a. full name of nominee(s)
b. name and location of VA facility,
c. position title, series, and grade,
d. chronological review of Federal employment,
e. work experience other than Federal employment,
f. military service, if any, and;
g. educational background.

3. You may include supporting documentation such as publicity, citations, photographs, etc., but only one complete set is required for each nomination. Additionally, you may include individual or group nominations. Please complete attached VA Form 3496, Authorization to Release Information, on each nominee.

4. Nominations must be endorsed by appropriate officials and forwarded to the Office of Human Resources (20A2) no later than April 24, 2000. Please include one copy of each nomination. You may e-mail or call Francene Shelton on (202) 273-5913 with questions regarding this announcement.

Joseph Thompson
Joseph Thompson
Under Secretary for Benefits

Attachment

AUTHORIZATION TO RELEASE INFORMATION

The following Privacy Act Addendum, Authorization to Release Information, must be submitted with each nomination. Information is disclosed voluntarily and is used in the selection process and for publicity and related purposes. Not providing all or part of the requested information may result in a nominee not receiving full consideration.

(Clip and attach to nomination)

Name of Nominee(s): ____

Title/Grade/Pay Plan: ____

Organization: ____

SSN: ______________________ **Date of Birth:** ______________________

Place of Birth: ____

AUTHORIZATION TO RELEASE INFORMATION: Except as specified below, VA may use all personal information contained in my nomination for promotion and publicity of the Veterans Benefits Administration Outstanding Customer Service Awards Program.

Exceptions: Please specify any personal information that you do not want released.

______________________________________ ______________________

Signature **Date**

VA Form 3496
January 1996

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Veterans Benefits Administration
Washington DC 20420

May 18, 2000

VBA Letter 20-00-15

In Reply Refer To:

Director (00)
All VA Regional Offices and Centers

SUBJ: TRIP Implementation

1. On March 24, 2000, the Compensation and Pension Service (C&P) released Fast Letter 00-24 announcing the availability of the TRIP Level 1 training package. The purpose of this letter is to provide all regional offices with guidance on implementing TRIP Level 1 training.

2. Regional offices should begin discussions with their service organization partners immediately to establish a training plan. Regional offices can only *offer* this training as it is not mandatory. Service organizations cannot be forced to participate in TRIP. Please provide a copy of your plan to your Office of Field Operations analyst by COB May 26, 2000. Stations should develop their training plans and schedules based upon available resources and current workload situations. Your plan should include, but is not limited to, the following:

- Date you plan to begin training.
- How you plan on administering the 31 hours of training. (1 day a week? Every Monday? All 31 hours in one week?)
- How many FTE you anticipate dedicating to the training.
- Where you plan on holding the training.
- The name and position of your TRIP coordinator.
- Which service organizations have expressed interest in receiving the training from your station.
- How many service officers you anticipate training for Level 1.
- Any assistance you will need from OFO or C&P in administering the training.

3. Each regional office should also keep an accurate account of the number of man-hours expended administering Level 1 training.

4. During the week of May 15, 2000, the C&P Service will be sending each regional office a hard copy of the TRIP Training Package. Regional offices are responsible for the duplication of this package to support their training.

5. In addition to providing training at your regional office, each station is encouraged to solicit interest in regionalized training at the Baltimore Training Academy for any of its service partners. Based on interest in this approach, regionalized training for large groups will be made available throughout the year.

There are two sessions currently scheduled: September 5 through September 9, 2000; and November 13 through November 17, 2000. Each session can accommodate 80 participants. Service organizations will be expected to fund their own travel expenses if they choose to take advantage of this training approach. Training at the Academy will be facilitated by a team comprised of C&P Service employees and field employees. Travel for field employees will be funded by the C&P Service and OFO.

6. A third avenue of training that should be made known to your service partners is the certification of designated service officers to conduct training sessions for their respective organizations. This "train the trainer" approach will work as follows: once a service officer successfully completes a level of training, he or she can be recommended by the parent organization as an instructor. VBA would retain jurisdiction over the post-testing and certification process.

7. As your regional office begins to implement Level 1 training, your TRIP coordinator should establish and maintain an Excel spreadsheet that contains the participant's name, mailing address, organization, all individual lesson scores, and the participant's overall score. A TRIP training report format will be provided to your regional office in the near future. Once received, this report should be used to maintain and forward results to OFO and the C&P Service. VACO will maintain a central database containing all test results.

8. Attached is a document prepared by the C&P Service and OFO addressing some of the most frequently asked questions regarding TRIP. We hope this document will clarify some of your questions. Future documents addressing common issues and questions are planned as the TRIP initiative progresses.

9. Please refer any questions regarding the training materials to the C&P Service (VAVBAWAS/CO/TRIP). Any questions regarding the implementation of this training or the reporting requirements should be directed to Charlie Woolford (202-273-6468) or Jon Skelly (202-273-7225) in the Office of Field Operations.

Patrick Nappi
Deputy Under Secretary For Operations

Enclosure

TRIP IMPLEMENTATION

Introduction

1) What does TRIP stand for?

TRIP stands for Training, Responsibility, Involvement, and Preparation of Claims.

2) What defines a TRIP claim? End Product? VITAL or non-VITAL issue?

Any claim from a participating representative can be processed under the TRIP program regardless of end product, VITAL issue, or type of claim.

Establishing the Program

1) How do I establish TRIP in my office?

TRIP is a partnership between VA and the service organizations. Your director, veterans service center manager, and others concerned should meet with the supervisors of all service organizations affiliated with your office.

2) What does TRIP offer to VA's service partners?

Representatives will gain enhanced service to their claimants. Regional offices and representatives will witness improvements in accuracy, efficiency, and timeliness of claims processing.

Participants

1) Who can attend?

Any *accredited representative* who desires TRIP training. Secretaries or other service organization support who are not accredited may attend the training at the discretion of the regional office but they cannot become certified.

2) Can I add another accredited representative even though that representative was not selected by his or her organization to attend?

VA does not have a problem with additional participants. The issue of selection for participation is an internal organizational issue which needs to be addressed by each RO and service organization.

Workflow Issues

1) Does a special team handle TRIP claims in a regional office?

RO management will decide how the workload and workflow will be established at the local level.

2) What happens if we haven't merged and don't have teams?

TRIP training does not require teams. Training will occur regardless of the structure of the RO, although it is anticipated that most ROs will be in a case management environment by the end of calendar year 2000.

3) Does TRIP supersede PARDS, SOAR, or any other established RO programs?

TRIP will eventually replace all similar RO programs. Local programs should be continued until completion of Level 1 of the TRIP initiative.

4) How does a station convert from an RO program to TRIP?

Regional offices *must* implement TRIP training if one or more service organizations want it. The workflow procedure will be determined by the RO and the service organization. Service to veterans should not be allowed to suffer during the changeover.

5) What happens if TRIP efforts adversely affect workload or workflow?

RO management will address this issue within its respective Service Delivery Network. Ultimately, with resources currently used to develop claims being free to make decisions, TRIP should impact positively on workload.

6) Can TRIP cases be part of brokered work?

There is no prohibition against brokering TRIP cases.

<u>Claims Issues</u>

1) Do TRIP claims need special identification such as colored cover sheets?

The RO will determine such workflow mechanisms. It would seem beneficial to identify the development that has taken place by the representative in order to minimize duplicate efforts. Certain development, such as requests for service medical records and physical examinations, will remain the responsibility of the VA following Level 1 training.

2) Do TRIP claims have to be ready-to-rate claims?

No. TRIP claims should be fully developed claims to the extent that a service organization representative can develop the claim. Some claims may require additional RO action. The closer local staffs work with the service organization representatives, the better the product and the less additional work required. Communication and cooperation between the service organization personnel and VA personnel are essential to the success of the initiative.

3) What happens if a claimant changes his or her power-of-attorney (POA) in the middle of a TRIP claim?

The claim will have been developed from the onset. A change in POA will not affect the outcome of a decision.

4) Is there a percentage of claims that have to be submitted as TRIP claims in a particular office?

No. However, VA hopes that TRIP claims will become the majority of claims received.

5) Who handles follow-up actions when screening cases? Does this depend on who initiated the development?

Any necessary development will either be handled by RO personnel or service organization representatives. RO personnel will most likely perform this duty based on generated Work-In-Process (WIPP) lists. However, it is not unreasonable to expect that such follow-up could be undertaken by service organization representatives. Remember that development actions undertaken by service organization representatives does not relieve VA from its statutory duty to assist.

6) How long can a service organization hold on to a claim?

A service organization representative should not be holding on to claims. The TRIP Committee will review various local options and forward suggestions.

7) Can a service organization representative who develops a TRIP claim represent the claimant on the claim in a subsequent process, such as in a Decision Review Officer (DRO) format or appeal?

Yes. The function of a service organization representative is to properly develop a claim for benefits so that the end result will be accurate and efficient service to the claimant. A VSO under TRIP cannot administratively disallow or render a decision on any claim. TRIP in no way affects the service organization representative's advocacy for the veteran.

8) Can TRIP claims be contract VA examination claims?

There is no prohibition to the type of examination requested or performed under TRIP.

9) Can VSOs hold claims after development?

No. Service organization representatives must fully develop a claim upon receipt and forward it to the RO. Service organization representatives do not practice holding onto claims.

10) Who has the date stamp?

All claims will be date stamped by the VA. The VA date stamp establishes the date of claim.

11) Will service organization representatives use VA letterhead?

No. Service organization representatives will not use VA letterhead.

12) Will VSOs be given access to AMIE under TRIP?

Not at this time. AMIE is a VHA system and access cannot be restricted by service organization POA. Major reprogramming by VHA will be required to grant access to service organization representatives. However, service organization representatives perform duties at the medical centers and can obtain medical information directly.

13) Will service organization representatives receive sensitive level access to VA systems?

No.

14) Who updates suspense dates if service organization representatives only have inquiry access following Level 1 training?

VA personnel.

Training Coordinator Concerns

1) Will I get the backing of management and the cooperation of National Service Officers (Service organization representatives)?

Yes. The Under Secretary for Benefits has instructed RO management to provide TRIP training to any accredited service organizations that request it. Remember, regional offices can encourage participation but they cannot force service organizations to participate.

2) Who handles RO personnel and service organization representative conflicts?

RO management will be apprised of any problems. The Office of Field Operations needs to be informed of the problems that arise in order to brief the national organizations.

3) Can I train VSOs side-by-side with new VA hires such as veterans service representatives?

Yes. When TRIP is fully implemented all training will use the same materials. It is intended that both groups can be trained at the same time. Training classes which are comprised of both VA employees and VSOs will provide different perspectives which will be beneficial to the claims process.

4) How will we communicate with each other regarding the progress of TRIP?

Conference calls, satellite broadcasts, or E-mail.

5) Is TRIP designed for in-house or can regional office employees travel to remote areas? Can training be set up at VA medical centers?

TRIP training was originally designed to be conducted at regional offices. We hope to develop a methodology to train outbased VSOs at a later date.

Training Schedules and Class Size

1) Is there a time limit on the completion of TRIP training?

Not specifically. However, the RO and participating service organizations must immediately begin to develop a plan and schedule for the implementation of TRIP training. This plan should be submitted to each station's OFO analyst by COB May 26, 2000.

2) Is there a limit to the amount of participants in a session held at my regional office?

No. It is recommended that the class size be kept within the 10-15 range.

3) What is the best training approach for Module 1 at my regional office?

Each participant should have his or her own computer to use during the training. Naturally, this depends upon your station's training environment.

4) Do the lessons have to be taught in sequence?

Past experience has demonstrated that Benefits Delivery Network (BDN) System (Module 1, Lesson 1) and ARMS (Module 1, Lesson 3) should be taught first. Lessons in the development section utilize BDN and ARMS. Additionally, the first four lessons of Module 2 should be taught in order.

5) Can a service organization representative select individual lessons?

No. A service organization representative must attend all lessons.

6) Can a service organization representative "test out" of TRIP training?

Yes. The "test out" certification test is the regular certification test. If the service organization representative scores below 70 percent, the service organization representative must sit through the formal training. The "test out" option should not be encouraged.

Training Package

1) What does the TRIP training package consist of?

The TRIP training package has two modules: Module 1 for computer systems and Module 2 for core development.

2) How many lessons are there?

There are 5 lessons in Module 1 and 10 lessons in Module 2.

3) What if I find that the package needs to be updated with current laws or regulations?

Please E-mail your comments to the C&P Service's TRIP MS Exchange Mailbox at VAVBAWAS/CO/TRIP.

4) How long is the training curriculum?

Roughly 31 hours in length.

5) What happens if a service organization representative misses a lesson?

Conduct a remake of the lesson that fits your schedule as well as that of the service organization representative

Certification

1) What is certification?

A process whereby *accredited* TRIP partners who elect to receive training by VA and demonstrate gained knowledge are entrusted to share in the preparation of claims for veterans benefits and to use VA systems for that purpose.

2) When are the certification tests administered?

The certification tests should be administered after each lesson.

3) What is the score needed to become certified?

A participant must obtain a cumulative average of 70% or above. Therefore, a participant does not have to pass every lesson in order to be certified.

4) What proof do the participants receive that they are certified?

Each regional office will provide a document of certification for Level 1 of TRIP training accompanied by a letter to each successful participant. The letter can cite the overall score and the lesson(s) in which the participant scored below 70 percent.

5) What happens to those participants who scored below 70 percent?

The participant will receive a notification letter regarding the score and the option to retake the training when it is next offered by the regional office. The participant will be afforded an opening in the next TRIP session held at the RO to retake the training. A participant may only retake the training one time.

6) What are benchmarks and reviews?

A benchmark is a tool used to judge the level of knowledge the group has and adjust the instruction to that level. A review is a tool used to judge the level of knowledge the group has acquired as a result of training. Benchmarks and reviews are not meant to be graded or used as a score for certification. Rather, these tools should be reviewed with the participants immediately after the completion of each tool. Avoid a lengthy discussion of the benchmark exercises as the material will be covered in the lesson.

7) Is the certification test open book?

No.

Record Keeping

1) How should we set up our records?

An individual manila folder or envelope should be maintained for each participant in a locked area. Each folder will contain all original certification tests. Additionally, a spreadsheet should be maintained which contains the participant's name, mailing address, organization, all individual lesson scores, and the overall score.

2) Why does VACO need electronic data?

VACO will maintain a master database of all participants who are certified for each level of TRIP training.

3) What do we do when the TRIP training is completed?

Each RO's Training Coordinator will ensure that all records are accurate and forwarded to VACO for control purposes.

4) How do I report all TRIP training? Is there a specific format?

Training reports will be issued to each regional office. These feeder reports will be completed and forwarded to VACO to be included into a central database. Questions regarding the reports should be sent to the VAVBAWAS/CO/TRIP mailbox.

Regional offices should maintain the necessary data mentioned in the cover letter using there own Excel spreadsheets until the TRIP training reports are sent out from the C&P Service.

<u>Other</u>

1) Is there a QI or STAR review for TRIP claims?

There is no special review of TRIP claims. Reviews under STAR are "outcome" based - only the final product (decision) is judged. If the decision was made without proper development, it is erroneous under STAR.

2) Who is the CO point of contact (POC)?

The TRIP POC in OFO is Charlie Woolford. In the C&P Service it is Joe Salvatore.

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Veterans Benefits Administration
Washington DC 20420

MAY 18 2000

VBA Letter 20-00-16

Director (00)
All VA Regional Offices and Centers

In Reply Refer To:

SUBJ: Incorporation of the Business Continuity Contingency Plan into the Continuity of Operations

1. The Business Continuity Contingency Plan (BCCP) was prepared by the regional offices as part of the government-wide Year 2000 (Y2K) initiative to ensure the continuation of operations in the event of Y2K related failures. As of April 1, 2000, the BCCP ceases to be a Y2K related document and becomes an appendix of the Continuity of Operations (COOP).

2. While the COOP serves as the primary emergency preparedness plan, the BCCP provides the procedures to ensure continuity of business operations if there is a disruption to normal work processes. The BCCP is the regional office plan to continue work processes in the event of a VBA infrastructure failure or a disruption of services from any of our business partners. The BCCP includes the Payment Contingency Plan and the Event Specific Guidance for the regional offices.

3. The terms ***Y2K*** and ***Year 2000***, as well as any reference to the period of transition from 1999 to 2000, should be removed from the BCCP. Deletion or exclusion of these references does not alter or have any impact on the content of the document.

4. The BCCP focuses on a short-term disruption and should be used to facilitate the resumption of normal service at the earliest possible time. If the situation requires long-term resolution, the COOP will be implemented and will supersede the BCCP.

5. Questions about preparing your COOP should be directed to Al Bissett, VBA Emergency Preparedness Officer, on 202-273-7584.

Patrick Nappi
Deputy Under Secretary for Operations

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Veterans Benefits Administration
Washington DC 20420

MAY 22 2000

VBA Letter 20-00-~~XX~~ 17

Director (00/21/27)
All VA Regional Offices and Centers

In Reply Refer To: 211B

SUBJ: BVA Requests for Claims Folders from Regional Offices

1. When the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims (CAVC) remands claims back to the Board of Veterans Appeals (BVA), the BVA is responsible for obtaining the claims folder and complying with the Court's remand orders. There are instances where the Office of General Counsel, Professional Staff Group VII (PSG VII) has returned the claims folder back to the regional offices prior to the issuance of the Court's remand decision.

2. The BVA has encountered difficulties in obtaining claims folders from regional offices when PSG VII has returned the claims folder to them prior to the Court's remand order. Frequently, the response to a request has been: "The folder has been misplaced." This has resulted in inexcusable delays in sending the folder to BVA, or in some instances, the folder not being sent at all.

3. Regional office management should be aware of situations where a claims folder cannot be transferred immediately. Whatever action is necessary to have the claims folder transferred to BVA must be taken. Office management must be involved to resolve any problems preventing the rapid transfer of the file. To ensure that station management is aware of delays in transfers of folders to BVA, the following procedures are established:

(a) BVA will e-mail and/or fax a request for transfer of the claims folder to the designated contact point at the regional office of jurisdiction. That contact point is responsible for locating the claims folder, establishing temporary folders with copies of necessary documents, and transferring the file within three workdays of the request. The folders will be sent via FEDEX to BVA. Their mailing address is:

Board of Veterans' Appeals
811 Vermont Avenue, NW
Attn: Chief, Operations Support Division
Room 346
Washington, DC 20420

Director (00/21/27)
All VA Regional Offices and Centers

The designated/responsible individual should also notify BVA via e-mail that the folder has been transferred and when they can reasonably expect to receive the file. That expectation should be measured in days. Information concerning potential problems may be provided to BVA by e-mail or by calling Mr. Clarence Holmes, Chief, Operations Support Division (0141L) at (202) 565-6200.

(b) If BVA is notified of a delay or if BVA has not been notified within the three workdays that the claims folder has been transferred, a follow-up request will be e-mailed. A copy will be provided to the Service Center Manager.

(c) If BVA has not been notified that the claims folder has been transferred within three workdays of the second request, a third request will be e-mailed. A copy will go to the Regional Office Director.

(d) If BVA still has not been notified that the claims folder has been transferred within three workdays of the third request, a fourth request will be e-mailed. A copy will go to the attention of the appropriate Associate Deputy Under Secretary for Operations.

4. On receipt of this letter, each regional office is to provide BVA with the primary and secondary points of contact for the first requests. That information must also include the contacts' telephone number(s), e-mail address(es), and fax number(s). This information should be sent via e-mail to Mr. Clarence Holmes, Chief, Operations Support Division, or to Mr. Stanley Mitchell, Assistant Chief, Operations Support Division with a copy provided to Mr. Brad Flohr, Chief, Advisory and Judicial Review Staff or Arnold Russo of the Judicial Review Staff, Compensation and Pension Service (211B).

5. If there are any questions concerning the contents of this letter, you may contact the Judicial Review Staff, Compensation and Pension Service via e-mail or by calling (202) 273-6978.

6. This letter will not be rescinded.

for

Joseph Thompson
Under Secretary for Benefits

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Veterans Benefits Administration
Washington DC 20420

MAY 22 2000

VBA Letter 20-00-18

Director (00/21)
All VA Regional Offices and Centers

SUBJ: Volunteers Needed for the Job Skills Certification Design Team

1. Discussions have started on developing a Job Skills Certification program in VBA. For this type of certification, we need to ensure a high level of accuracy and be as inclusive as possible in identifying the tasks and skills required for each job position. We're now forming a Job Skills Certification Design Team to develop the certification instrument for the Veterans Service Representative (VSR) position. Volunteers are sought to be part of this team.

2. For the VSR Job Skills Certification Design Team we need volunteers at the GS-10 and GS-11 levels who have a good understanding of the processes, laws, and regulations pertaining to claims for compensation and pension benefits. The first meetings of the team will be in Central Office, probably in June 2000. Please send names of volunteers along with a brief description of their experience to the Office of Field Operations by close of business Wednesday, May 31, 2000.

3. Employees should be encouraged to volunteer for this team project. It's to everyone's benefit to share knowledge, experience, and ideas regarding certification for the VSR position. We'd like to keep this process as open as possible with extensive input from a wide variety of field experts.

Patrick Nappi
Deputy Under Secretary for Operations

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Veterans Benefits Administration
Washington DC 20420

JUN 5 2000

In Reply Refer To:

VBA Letter 20-00-19

Directors (00)
See list of addressees

SUBJ: Facilities Represented by National Federation of Federal Employees

1. The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) has filed a petition seeking to become the exclusive representative for those employees currently represented by the National Federation of Federal Employees (NFFE). Federal Labor Relations Authority (FLRA) regulations **require** that the enclosed Notice be posted on facility bulletin boards where official notices to employees are normally posted. This Notice may be reproduced locally if necessary. **This Notice shall be posted on bulletin boards at your facility on June 8, 2000 through close of business June 18, 2000. FLRA requires that this Notice be posted for ten (10) days.**

2. After the posting period is over, the Notice along with your certification of posting should be retained at your station. Following FLRA proceedings on the AFGE petition, another posting may be required. Affected facilities are required to certify that the Notice was posted. Facilities must send via facsimile certification of the posting to the Customer Advisory and Consulting Group (CACG) (051B), ATTN: Amy Briggs. The facsimile telephone number is 202-273-9776. The certification should be signed by VBA's Regional Office Director or Center Assistant Director and sent within three (3) days after the Notice has been removed from bulletin boards.

3. VBA's Office of Human Resources will ensure compliance with the posting requirements. Questions concerning posting requirements should be referred to John Haltigan (202-273-4928), Doug Katcher (202-273-9824), Crystal Wiggins (202-273-4924), Norman Jacobs (202-273-4922), Amy Briggs (202-273-9833) or Jennifer Long (202-273-7320).

Patrick Nappi
Deputy Under Secretary for Operations

Enclosure

Addressees:

Director, Atlanta VARO (316/00)
Director, Cleveland VARO (325/00)
Director, Columbia VARO (319/00)
Director, Fargo VAM&ROC (437/00)
Director, Houston VARO (362/00)
Director, Indianapolis VARO (326/00)
Director, Jackson VARO (323/00)
Director, Little Rock VARO (350/00)
Director, Louisville VARO (327/00)
Director, Milwaukee VARO (330/00)
Director, Montgomery VARO (322/00)
Director, Portland VARO (348/00)
Director, Roanoke VARO (314/00)
Director, Austin Systems Development Staff (20S37)

NOTICE TO EMPLOYEES

FROM THE

FEDERAL LABOR RELATIONS AUTHORITY

A petition has been filed with the Regional Director of the Federal Labor Relations Authority to determine a matter related to the representation of certain employees at:

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

The petition was filed by: American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO

The purpose of the petition is to request:

(1) an election to determine if employees in an appropriate unit wish to be represented for the purposes of collective bargaining by an exclusive representative

This case is being investigated and NO DETERMINATION HAS BEEN MADE AT THIS TIME by the Federal Labor Relations Authority. This Notice should be conspicuously posted for a period of ten (10) days and should not be altered, defaced, or covered by other material.

Any request to intervene or cross-petition, accompanied by any necessary showing of interest, must be submitted in writing and filed with the Regional Director or the Hearing Officer prior to the opening of the hearing. If no hearing is held, a request to intervene and a cross-petition must be filed prior to action being taken by the Regional Director in accordance with section 2422.30 of the Regulations of the Federal Labor Relations Authority.

Federal Labor Relations Authority

Date of Posting:______________

Gerald M. Cole

Regional Director

Address: 901 Market Street, Suite 220
San Francisco, California 94103

Telephone: 415-356-5000

Case No. WA-RP-90103

THIS IS AN OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT NOTICE AND MUST NOT BE COVERED OR DEFACED

FLRA Form 30
(Rev. 1/96)

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Veterans Benefits Administration
Washington DC 20420

JUL 17 2000

In Reply Refer To:

VBA Letter 20-00- 20

To: Employees in all VACO Services and Offices and the Insurance Center, and Information Technology Employees at the Hines and Philadelphia Benefits Data Centers

Subj: Application Period for Calendar Year 2000 Voluntary Separation Incentive Program

1. This letter announces an application period to apply for a voluntary separation incentive payment (VSIP), also known as a buyout. This letter applies only to VBA Headquarters employees and field-based employees of Headquarters organizations, the Hines and Philadelphia Benefits Data Centers, and the Philadelphia Insurance Center. This application period includes provisions for employees who would leave VA rolls by regular retirement or resignation and also for employees who are eligible for an 'early out' retirement.

Significant issues for employees to consider for this VSIP application period

There are fewer than 80 VSIPs, or buyouts, available in this calendar year. There will not be another application period this year. There is no authority for buyouts next year. This opportunity to apply for a VSIP is based on the same law which authorized the VSIP in December 1999. However, because there are significant differences between the December 1999 VSIP and the current VSIP, employees should review the following details carefully. For additional information, employees may contact their local Human Resources liaison or VBA's Office of Human Resources (20A2).

Employees should recognize that early out authority is separate from buyout authority and that the programs have different expiration dates. Employees who request both an early out and a buyout must meet criteria of both programs. Requests for early outs combined with buyouts will be considered in rare circumstances.

Why VBA can offer buyouts in the year 2000

Public Law 106-117, the Veterans Millennium Health Care and Benefits Act, authorized VBA to offer a maximum of 240 separation incentive payments to regular and early retirees, and those who resign. The legislative authority for this voluntary separation incentive program provides that payments may be made to eligible employees to reduce or restructure the positions and functions within VBA.

What VBA wants to accomplish with buyouts in the year 2000

It is critical that we get the right mix of skills and resources if we are to accomplish our objectives for improved service delivery. For that reason, VBA sought buyout authority as a restructuring tool that would minimize the need to direct the reassignment of employees to other VBA facilities or conduct a reduction in force (RIF) later. We are hopeful that this buyout program will help us reach our restructuring goals.

Who is eligible for a buyout

The basic eligibility requirement is that you must have been continuously employed for at least 3 years in order to be eligible for a buyout. By law, the following categories of employees are **not eligible** for a VSIP:

- You relocated at government expense within the 24-month period preceding the effective date of separation;
- You received a recruitment or relocation bonus in the 24-month period preceding the separation date;
- You received a retention allowance in the 12-month period preceding the separation date;
- You are in receipt of a specific notice of involuntary separation for misconduct or unacceptable performance;
- You previously received any voluntary separation incentive payment from the government;
- You are a reemployed annuitant;
- You are eligible or would be eligible for disability retirement;
- You are covered by statutory reemployment rights and are on transfer to another organization; or
- You are serving on a time-limited appointment.

What Priority Categories Are Targeted for Restructuring and Reduction

All applications for a VSIP (buyout) will be considered based on VBA's restructuring and operational needs. VBA has targeted three priority categories of Headquarters positions (including field-based Headquarters positions) for buyout under this offer:

- Positions affected by Headquarters Redesign;
- Information Technology positions affected by Data Center Colocation;
- Insurance Center staff in positions affected by reduced workloads and paperless processing advancements.

How employees can apply for a VSIP (buyout)

- The application period for this VSIP is open from Monday, July 17, 2000, through 12 noon local time on Tuesday, August 15, 2000.
- You must complete and return the attached application to your HR liaison or VBA's Office of Human Resources (20A2) no later than 12 noon local time on Tuesday, August 15, 2000.
- You must select a date on which you will resign or retire and leave VA rolls.
- In order to be considered, your application must be received by the deadline. **No extensions are permitted**. Applications will be date-stamped upon receipt by the HR liaison or HR office to document receipt within the application period.
- Decisions on buyout applications will be made after the application period.

What requirements apply to employees who want a buyout and an early out

Employees who want a buyout and an "early out" must meet all the requirements and eligibility conditions of the VSIP program and also for the Voluntary Early Retirement Authority (VERA) as stated in VBA Letter 20-99-80 dated November 15, 1999 and as amended December 2, 1999. The VERA requirements include the following:

- Service Requirements. You must have at least 25 years of creditable service at any age or at least 20 years of creditable service at age 50 or above.
- Paid Relocation. You have not relocated at government expense within the past twelve months.
- Deadline to be off the rolls. You must be off VA rolls no later than September 30, 2000.

When employees can leave VA after approval of their buyout application

If you apply and are approved for a VSIP (buyout) under this offer, or for a VSIP and a VERA (early out), you must leave VA by resignation or retirement by separation dates as described below.

- Deadline to be off rolls for a VSIP only (NOT eligible for early out). You may request any date up to December 31, 2000. Your application must contain a date.
- Deadline to be off rolls for a VSIP and a VERA (eligible for early out). You must be off the rolls no later than September 30, 2000. By law, no "early out" separations are permitted after the September 30 deadline. **NOTE**: If the "early out" authority is extended beyond September 30, 2000, you may be required to remain on the rolls until a later date, but no later than December 31, 2000.

How much money will an employee be paid for the buyout

The amount of the voluntary separation incentive payment is equal to your calculated severance pay or $25,000, whichever is less. Severance pay equals one week's basic pay for each of the first ten years of creditable Federal service plus two week's basic pay for each year of creditable service over 10 years. In addition, an age factor applies which increases the amount by 10% for each year your age exceeds 40 years.

The required VSIP (buyout) Agreement

Employees who apply for VSIP must sign an agreement that the decision to resign or retire under these circumstances is entirely voluntary and that they agree to repay the incentive in full prior to being reemployed by, or to entering into a personal services contract with, the Federal government within 5 years of the date of separation. Waivers of repayment will be considered by the Director of the Office of Personnel Management only for individuals who possess unique abilities and are the only qualified applicant available for a position.

Number of buyouts 'slots' available

VBA has fewer than 80 buyout slots available from the original 240 buyouts authorized.

Buyout Program Limitations

The number of buyouts VBA is able to offer under this program is limited by law. It may also be necessary to limit the number of buyouts approved in individual offices or organizations if the buyout costs exceed the funds available to support the program. Additionally, it may be necessary to limit buyouts if approval of all applicants in a specific occupational group would seriously impact our ability to continue adequate service levels. Under such circumstances, applications from employees in the same or similar positions would be approved in order of the earliest service computation date.

How buyouts are approved

All applications for VSIP must receive final approval from the Deputy Under Secretary for Management. If the total number of buyouts recommended for approval exceeds the number of buyouts available, the Deputy Under Secretary for Management will approve buyouts on the basis of restructuring initiatives, employee skill sets, resources, and the need to balance workload and staffing.

2. We emphasize that applying for a separation incentive payment is <u>entirely voluntary</u> on your part. Your HR liaison or VBA's Office of Human Resources (20A2) can provide you with computations of your estimated separation payment and, if eligible, your estimated retirement annuity. Retirement counseling sessions are also available and can be scheduled by contacting your HR liaison.

Thomas ... for

Nora E. Egan

Attachment

Department of
Memorandum
Veterans Affairs

Date:

From:

Subj: Application for a Voluntary Separation Incentive Payment (VSIP)

To: Office of Human Resources (20A2)

1. _____ **VSIP Request with regular retirement**. I hereby request to retire with a Voluntary Separation Incentive Payment (VSIP). My decision to retire is entirely voluntary and has not been coerced. I meet the age and service requirements for regular retirement. I request to retire effective ____________________________.

______ **VSIP Request with resignation**. I hereby request to resign with a Voluntary Separation Incentive Payment (VSIP). My decision to resign is entirely voluntary and has not been coerced. I request to resign effective ________________________.

______ **VSIP Request with early out**. I hereby request to retire with a Voluntary Separation Incentive Payment (VSIP). My decision to retire is entirely voluntary and has not been coerced. I meet the age and service requirements for early retirement. I request to retire effective _________________________.

2. I met the requirements for a VSIP, having been continuously employed for at least 3 years. I am not:

- an employee who, during the previous 24 months, received a recruitment or relocation bonus or has been relocated at Government expense;
- an employee who, during the 12 months preceding the separation date, received a retention allowance;
- an employee in receipt of a specific notice of involuntary separation for misconduct or unacceptable performance;
- an employee who previously received any buyout payment by the Federal Government and has not repaid such payment;

- a reemployed annuitant;
- an employee who is or would be eligible for disability retirement;
- an employee with statutory reemployment rights on transfer to another organization; or,
- an employee who is serving on a time limited appointment.

3. I understand the consequences of subsequent employment with the Government. An individual who has received a voluntary separation incentive payment (VSIP) under this section and accepts any employment for compensation with the Government of the United States, or who works for any agency of the United States Government through a personal services contract, within 5 years after the date of the separation on which the payment is based shall be required to pay, prior to the individual's first day of employment, the entire amount of the incentive payment to the agency that paid the incentive payment. I understand that a waiver of repayment may only be approved by the Director, Office of Personnel Management, for an individual who possesses unique qualities and is the only qualified applicant available for the position.

4. I further understand that, if I am approved to receive a separation incentive, this statement serves as my commitment to retire. If not approved to receive the separation incentive, I understand that I will be notified and that I will not be bound by my election. I understand that final decisions on buyouts may be delayed depending on availability of funds.

______________________________ ______________________
Employee Signature Date

______________________________ _____-_____-_____
Employee Name (printed) SSN

______________________________ (____) ______________
Organization/Location Work Telephone Number