

TDVS Benefits Bulletin

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- March Lunch and Learn, March 9, 2022 @ 11:30 A.M. CST, VA S.A.V.E. and a Review of General Suicide Prevention Efforts

Suicide Prevention Case Managers, Sabrina Dowd-Abele and Laura Hodges from the VA Chattanooga Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) Suicide Prevention Team on how to respond to and manage a suicidal crisis and provide available resources.

VA S.A.V.E. Training will help you act with care and compassion if you encounter a veteran who is in crisis or experiencing suicidal thoughts. The acronym S.A.V.E. helps you remember the important steps involved in suicide prevention:

S = Signs of suicidal thinking should be recognized

A = Ask the most important question of all — “Are you thinking of killing yourself?”

V = Validate the veteran’s experience

E = Encourage treatment and expedite getting help

You can prevent veteran suicide. There are behaviors that may be signs a veteran needs support. In this class, you will learn to recognize these warning signs and the 'do's and don'ts' when trying to help someone in crisis.

- REQUIRED TRAINING – ***SAVE THE DATE*** Spring Quarterly Regional Training, April 6th, 2022, from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. CST. The training event will be virtual with in-person viewing opportunities in each region (East, Middle, West). More information to follow soon.
- April Initial Accreditation Training, April 18th – April 22nd, 2022. **Please note this course has moved one week earlier.
- [2022 Service Officer Training Calendar](#)

Caseflow Access

In December, TDVS hosted a lunch and learn that introduced advocates to Caseflow, which is a web-based tool that enables the tracking and processing of appealed claims at the Board of Veterans' Appeals (BVA). It's currently used for Appeals Modernization Act (AMA) appeals and will eventually replace the current system of record for all appeals, the Veterans Appeals Control and Location System (VACOLS), which was created in 1979 on now-outdated infrastructure.

This lunch and learn covered Caseflow basics – What is it? How does it work? How will it benefit your advocacy?

VA recently completed implementation of all TDVS Caseflow requests. All TDVS accredited representatives should be able to access this tool. The [recorded presentation and slides](#) are available if you need a refresher. This [Caseflow: VSO Quick Reference Guide](#) is also a great resource.

VA and Veteran Benefit Updates

Regulatory Updates – Final Rule – Threshold for Reporting VA Debts to Consumer Reporting Agencies

On February 2, 2022, VA published a [final rule](#) to amend its regulation that governs reporting delinquent debts to Consumer Reporting Agencies or CRAs. This rule will be effective March 4, 2022. Here's a more [detailed explanation](#) of the rule's impact from the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau.

Debt Management Center Updates

DMC resumed sending debt notification on October 1, 2021, after suspending collection on new debts from April 2020 through September 2021.

- DMC had over 400,000 paused letters to release and currently have about 230,000 remaining.

VA's [debt management portal](#) allows veterans to check the status of debt, make payments or request assistance. Veterans can also submit a VA Form 5655, Financial Status Report on the debt portal to request a waiver. At present, access is for veterans only, however there is a roadmap to add access for others including VSOs in the future.



TDVS is working to have a Debt Management Center representative at the Spring Quarterly Regional Training. Also, don't forget that DMC has a dedicated phone line for VSO's -- 612-970-5737.

Mail Delays – Update

Past Benefit Bulletins have highlighted significant mail delays at both the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and Board of Veterans' Appeals (BVA). A [recent release](#) from BVA indicates they have resolved their mail delays.

There are opportunities to contest an adverse VA decision that may have resulted from mail delays at both VBA and BVA. Please contact TDVS's [Appeals Division](#) if you have any questions or concerns.

Public Service Loan Forgiveness

Veterans and active duty servicemembers can take advantage of the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF). This federal loan forgiveness program is targeted to borrowers who work in nonprofit or public sector organizations. It underwent major reforms within the last year that will allow thousands of additional borrowers to qualify for relief, including changes that may benefit servicemembers and veterans. Here's [VA's Blog Post](#) with links to additional information.

Practice Like a Pro

Ready for Decision

Recently, the Appeals Division has received several inquiries with questions about claims that are "ready for decision" but have seen no movement for several months. Please continue to use the Appeals Division as a resource to explore expediting claims.

There are several stages (Development, Evidence, Decision, Award, Authorization) to the claims adjudication process. Weekly, VA publishes detailed claims data, including by State, on their progress in processing Compensation, Pension and Education benefits. Typically, the awaiting evidence stage takes the longest in the claims process.

Here's a snapshot of Tennessee claims from the February 7, 2022 [Monday Morning Workload Report](#) that shows the number of pending claims and the state in the adjudication process.

		# Pending	# Pending > 125 Days	% Pending > 125 Days	% Pending Development	% Pending Evidence	% Pending Decision	% Pending Award	% Pending Authorization
Tennessee	Tennessee-Total	16,359	6,917	42.3%	1.8%	64.8%	32.0%	1.1%	0.3%

Generally, if development is complete and a claim is ready for decision or RFD, VA will only expedite or provide priority processing if the claim meets [certain requirements](#) --

1. Financial Hardship and Homelessness
2. Advanced Age – 85
3. Terminal Illness
4. Diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS/Lou Gehrig’s Disease)
5. Very Seriously Ill or Injured During Military Operations
6. Former Prisoner of War
7. Medal of Honor or Purple Heart Award Recipient

You can request priority processing by using VA Form 20-10207. Don’t forget to include evidence, which is outlined on the VA Form 20-10207, that supports the request.

Not all “stuck” claims are RFD. There are Blue Water Navy or BWN claims that have been “in development” for many months, some over a year. Many of these claims have been sent to the North Atlantic District Office for research. This office has the “12 Nautical Mile Team” and works with the Records Research Center or RRC. This team handles only records research for BWN claims that could not be proven at the BWN ROs. You can determine if a claim is at this office by looking in the VBMS Notes tab.

Related To	Note Type	Action Taken
335 - Review - 10/21/2019	VBMS_PERMANENT	Transferred the claim to 392 - North Atlantic District Office: Blue Water Navy- RRS
335 - Review - 10/21/2019	PERMANENT	

It is not necessarily a bad thing for a claim to be in this office. It means VA thinks the claim deserves a deep dive into the Veteran’s records to determine if the veteran or survivor qualifies for benefits because of service within 12 nautical miles of Vietnam.

Here are several additional resources that can help you speed the award of benefits:

- [2021’s Regional Quarterly Training](#) focused on advocacy tips to expedite VA claims.

- [Benefits Bulletin 21-6](#) provided guidance on how to use VBMS to track VA development actions.
- [Benefits Bulletin 21-7](#) outlined how to use partial rating decisions to speed the award of benefits.

Board of Veterans' Appeals Workload and Production Metrics

One of the most common questions posed to you as an advocate is when a veteran or claimant can expect a hearing or decision on their appeal. The Board of Veterans' Appeals (BVA) publishes [metrics](#) that can assist you in answering this question

BVA's legacy decision docket date is August 2019. This means BVA is making decisions on legacy appeals that were certified to the BVA and docketed in August of this year. BVA continues to work the legacy docket with a goal of completing all legacy appeals in this fiscal year.

Board appeals under the Appeals Modernization Act (VA Form 10182) are being resolved quicker, however the inventory and length of time to get a decision have continued to increase as BVA focuses on legacy appeals. Through December 2021, the average days to complete an AMA appeal from Board intake are **314 days for direct review, 353 days for evidence** and **643 days for hearing**.

Caseflow, which is now available to all TDVS advocates, allows you to confirm BVA has established and is tracking the same BVA option (direct review, evidence or hearing the veteran requested on the VA Form 10182.

A claimant can also check their appeal status via [VA.gov](#). Veterans can create a [VA.gov account using ID.me](#) to better manage their benefits and access all VA resources.

[How to Create a VA.gov Account Using ID.me](#)



Informal Conferences

TDVS Appeals Division's customer service includes providing oral advocacy in support of veterans and claimants. Here is an update to ensure your clients receive the benefit of Appeals Division advocacy during their informal conference:

One of the options for disagreeing with a VA decision dated February 19, 2019, or later is by filing a VA Form 20-0996 to request a higher-level review. Claimants can request an informal conference as part of this option. If the claimant elects an informal conference, please provide the following Appeals Division contact information to ensure appellate representation.

Complete Block 16B of the VA form 20-0996 by selecting "Call my representative between 8:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. ET" and "Call my representative between 12:00 p.m. – 4:30 p.m. ET".

Block 17 should contain the following contact information -

17A. Lisa Ware

17B. 615-351-5067

17C. tdva.vbanas@va.gov

VA FORM 20-0996 APR 2021 Page 3

SECTION IV - OPTIONAL INFORMAL CONFERENCE

16. YOU OR YOUR AUTHORIZED REPRESENTATIVE MAY REQUEST AN INFORMAL CONFERENCE WITH THE HIGHER-LEVEL REVIEWER FOR THE SOLE PURPOSE OF POINTING OUT ERRORS OF FACT OR LAW IN THE PRIOR DECISION. (VA will only conduct one informal conference by telephonic communication associated with this request for Higher-Level Review.)

16A. I WOULD LIKE AN INFORMAL CONFERENCE. I understand electing an informal conference is optional and may delay a decision.

16B. IF YOU SELECTED THE BOX ABOVE, VA will make two attempts to contact you OR your representative to schedule the informal conference. Contact attempts will be between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. Eastern Time. INDICATE ONE PREFERENCE:

Call me between 8:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. ET Call me between 12:00 p.m. - 4:30 p.m. ET

Call my representative between 8:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. ET Call my representative between 12:00 p.m. - 4:30 p.m. ET

17. IF YOU WOULD LIKE VA TO CONTACT YOUR REPRESENTATIVE, YOU MUST PROVIDE YOUR REPRESENTATIVE'S CONTACT INFORMATION BELOW.

17A. REPRESENTATIVE'S NAME (First, Last)
 Lisa Ware

17B. REPRESENTATIVE'S TELEPHONE NUMBER (include Area Code)
 615-351-5067

17C. REPRESENTATIVE'S E-MAIL ADDRESS
 tdva.vbanas@va.gov

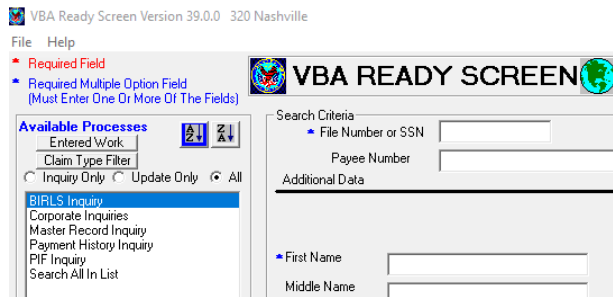
Please contact TDVS's [Appeals Division](#) if you have any questions or concerns.

Advocacy Tips

- Minimize adjudication delays by avoiding unnecessary development. How do I find the amount of military retirement pay a veteran is receiving?

It is important to complete all boxes on the VA Form 21-526EZ. This includes adding a veteran's military retired pay amount in the appropriate box. This should alleviate the need for VA to develop for this information. Here's a step-by-step guide to find this information using available VA tools --

- Open the SHARE application – type the veteran's file number in the box at the top of the ready screen.
- From the menu on the left side, select the "BIRLS Inquiry" so it is highlighted in blue. Select "Submit".



- On the BIRLS screen, select the "Miscellaneous Info" tab -- You will see the Retired Pay SBP box near the middle of the screen. Use the CURR amount to complete the VA Form 21-526EZ or respond to a VA development letter.

Retire Pay SBP		
	CURR	PRIOR
RETD AMT	2245	2217
RETD DATE	12/2020	12/2019

- How can I double check my work when completing forms in VetraSpec?

One of the most common issues seen during TDVS quality review is lack of complete information or missing signature(s). In fact, on average 1/3 of all forms packed in a month are not signed.

Here's a quick advocacy tip that will ensure you're dotting the I's and crossing the t's -- and most importantly inserting a signature -- on all the forms you package. When you finish filling out a form, select the 'Save this form and print it now' radial at the bottom of the form and click 'Go'.

Choose one:

Save this form and complete it later.

Save this form and print it now.

Do a quick visual run-down of the blocks for missing items. This is also a good opportunity to quickly go block-by-block and review the various forms with the client you are assisting. If you do not see it on the form here, the VA does not see it.

1. Is the Veteran's personal information, correct?
2. Are all appropriate boxes checked or completed? Look at ALL the boxes on the form one last time.
3. This is BIG! Did you add the veteran or claimant's (or your) signature?

A quick double check of your work can avoid unnecessary delays.

Advocate Spotlight

Please join us in welcoming Tennessee's newest accredited representatives:

Mary Deel, Veterans Outreach Coordinator, TDVS
Gary Hansard, Claiborne County
Jeff Oakey, Sumner County
Lisa Von Hagen, Maury County

Congratulations on your recent completion of TDVS's Accreditation Course and TDVS accreditation!

If you have an example of teamwork between Veteran service offices/organizations across the state making a difference in the lives of Tennessee veterans, please share with your Regional Director for possible inclusion in an upcoming "Advocate Spotlight."

TDVS Benefits Bulletins Can Be Found on the [VSO Tools](#) Portion of TDVS's Website