Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Benefits Administration

2020 Action Plan

Federal Customer Experience

US

**BY THE PEOPLE
FOR THE PEOPLE
WITH THE PEOPLE**

Who are we?

The mission of the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) is to serve as a leading advocate for Service members, Veterans, their families and survivors, delivering benefits and services that honor their service, assist in their readjustment, enhance their lives, and engender their full trust.

The relationship that VBA has with its customers begins while they still wear the uniform. VBA partners with the Department of Defense to provide access to information and benefits while members of the military are still serving. VBA dedicates time and resources to connecting with Service members at key touchpoints throughout the military life cycle to prepare them for their eventual transition to civilian life, and to create awareness of the range of VA benefits and services available before, during, and after transition.

The services and benefits discussed in this action plan are anchored around the occasion of transition from military service to civilian life, and VBA's customers' need to quickly and easily connect with VA for information and benefits. Veterans can come to VA for benefits at many different times driven by different needs and life occasions; the service improvements and focus on customer understanding discussed in this action plan cover these occasions as well. While VBA has chosen to tell the story of its planned service improvements through the framework of transition, VBA's planned efforts in FY20/21 will benefit Veterans of all eras and all VBA customers.

Across all benefits, VBA is focusing on obtaining and acting on customer feedback, improving self-service options online, simplifying communications, streamlining processes, and enhancing choice.

How do we deliver value to the public?

Occasion

TRANSITION: Service member preparing for separation is beginning to consider civilian career options and economic stability after leaving the military.

S/he needs to understand what VA can offer and where to go to get started.

TAP is administered at over **300** military installations worldwide. In **FY19** the TAP program achieved a **95.9 percent** satisfaction rate for VA Benefits & Service TAP briefings; over **200k** Service members attended TAP briefings; over **400k** transition support **touchpoints*** to Service members, Veterans, their families and caregivers were provided.

*TAP touches include attendance at multiple events and are not unique Transitioning Servicemembers (TSM), i.e the 90k touches are the total number of attendees at all listed events and many TSMs attend multiple events. For example if a TSM attends the VA Benefits and Services Briefing, Capstone and two MLC classes, it would be counted as four "TAP touches"

High-Impact Service

VBA provides a wide array of programs and services to support transitioning service members(TSM) and their families. VBA is using feedback from customers to improve existing offerings and to develop new programs to improve long-term outcomes of Veterans in the broad life domains of employment, education, health and social relationships, financial, social connectivity and overall satisfaction and well-being.

The Military to Civilian Readiness Pathway (M2C Ready) initiative encompasses a network of related programs and support services that begin while the individual is still in uniform and supports through transition to Veteran status. This support starts with training modules on VA benefits and other community supports provided on demand throughout the members military career via the Military Life Cycle (MLC) construct and continues with the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) courses provided in partnership with the TAP Interagency Partnership in the 365 days prior to separation.

VBA is obtaining feedback from program participants to continue focusing on program enhancements and process improvements. Customers are also able to access information via self-service on va.gov and eBenefits, or by calling VBA's national call centers.

Offering

Transitioning service members and new Veterans are preparing to make the most of VA benefits available when they need them.

Target FY20 metrics for TAP include the following:
- Customer Satisfaction for VA portion of TAP is 95%.

How do we deliver value to the public?

Occasion	High-Impact Service	Offering
RECEIVING CALL FROM VBA: The VA Solid Start program seeks to make early and consistent, caring contact with TSMs and Veterans in order to establish their relationship with VA, ensure their awareness of benefits and services available to them, lower their barrier to entry into VA mental health care, and support their successful transition into civilian life. (Over **85K** Veterans contacted through VBA's VA Solid Start (VASS) program between December 2019-July 2020. VASS program had an initial successful connect rate goal of 15%. To date, VASS agents have had successful conversations with **40.4%** of all TSMs providing support tailored to their individual transition needs.)	Since Dec. 2019, VA Solid Start program proactively engages newly separated Veterans during the first year post-separation. Through targeted outreach and follow up at specified times, VA helps new Veterans understand available benefits and connect more easily to VA benefits programs.	VBA actively engages with new Veterans. Newly separated Veterans have a clear understanding of the benefits available through VBA and how to use them. Referrals made to other VA benefits and mental health supports based on needs/requests of Veterans. In support of this objective, target FY20 metrics for the VA Solid Start Program include the following: • VA Solid Start first 90-day contact success rate: 15%. • A successful conversation is defined as an interaction in which a Solid Start agent reaches the Veteran and offers the VA Solid Start information. The agent is required to discuss any applicable time sensitive benefits as well as 2 additional programs the VA offers. • Additional VA Solid Start performance measures are currently under development
CALLING VBA: TSMs, Veterans, or their dependents need individualized answers to questions about their VA benefits eligibility or claim status. They prefer to speak with a person for assistance.	VBA Call Centers are available to answer the call. Agents provide general benefits information and answer personalized questions about benefits and claim status. VBA is also committed to enhancing available options for online self-service for many routine transactions, such as applying for various benefits, checking claim status, and checking payment status. Improved self-service capabilities will also improve call center capacity to provide hands-on assistance to meet ongoing demand.	Transitioning service members, Veterans, and their dependents have timely access to information about their benefits through their channel of choice. In support of this objective, target FY20 metrics for VA National Call Centers include: • Percent of calls answered by VBA National Call Center within two (2) minutes: 67% • Percent of calls blocked by VBA National Call Center: 0.4% • Percentage of interactions correctly managed by National Call Center: 90%

How do we deliver value to the public?

Occasion ⟶ High-Impact Service ⟶ Offering

Occasion	High-Impact Service	Offering
PURSUING EDUCATION: TSM needs to obtain credentials to make herself competitive for the civilian workforce so she can find a job that supports her family. She needs information to help her select the right career path, educational institution, and to understand how far her GI Bill education benefits will take her toward achieving that goal. (As of end of FY19, the Post-9/11 GI Bill program paid out over **$101B** to **over 2.1M** students since the program inception in August 2009. In FY19, VBA provided **$12B** through VA education programs to **909K** Veterans and their beneficiaries, processing over **3.6M claims.**)	VBA provides information to help beneficiaries determine which educational and career path is right for them, and to help them select the right training institution. This is available both via a self-service online tool, the GI Bill Comparison Tool, and via more personalized career planning and guidance. Beneficiaries interact with VBA to apply for education benefits, enroll in school, and to receive education benefits. VBA provides funding for training, including stipends for tuition, books and supplies, and in some cases payment for professional certification. VBA provides credentialing and monitors training providers, and provides ongoing training to schools to enable them to administer GI Bill benefits. VBA plans to start collecting formal feedback on the GI Bill experience in 2020.	VA Education Benefits advance the education and skills of Veterans, service members, family members, and survivors. In support of this objective, target FY20 metrics for GI Bill program include the following: • Original Claims: 28 days • Supplemental Claims: 14 days • Quality: 95%
SEEKING CAREER ADVICE: Veteran needs more targeted assistance figuring out the best civilian career field and which training or certifications will make him more competitive. He wants a personal approach to help him select the right goals and make the best use of his benefits.	Personalized career planning and guidance. VBA has offered this benefit to Veterans and beneficiaries for years, but the benefit was historically underutilized. The program has recently been redesigned with human-centered design (HCD) to better meet the needs and expectations of Veterans and beneficiaries, to allow for a more tailored personalized experience.	VBA provides personalized career planning and guidance to assist beneficiaries in making informed choices to maximize available benefits while preparing for civilian careers. • Performance measures for this newly redesigned program are currently under development

How do we deliver value to the public?

Occasion → High-Impact Service → Offering

Occasion	High-Impact Service	Offering
PURSUING VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION: TSM, Veteran with a service connected condition, or qualified dependent needs more personalized assistance in choosing a new career, qualifying for, seeking, and securing suitable employment. (In FY19: Over **122K** VR&E participants; Over **16K** Veterans achieved positive outcomes in the VR&E program in FY19 – a **5%** improvement from FY18; Over **29K** new plans were developed to assist Veterans with their employment and independent living goals at the end of FY19)	VBA's Veterans Readiness and Employment (VR&E) program provides professional career counseling and assistance in qualifying for and finding employment for TSM, Veterans, and dependents. The program helps customers find civilian careers or become more independent in daily life. Through modernization efforts with technology, staffing, and re-focus on employment services, participants will have more self-service options and access to qualified counselors than ever in 2020/2021.	Veterans have additional ways to manage their VR&E benefits and can opt in for self-service for a number of transactions like scheduling appointments with their counselor. In support of this objective, target FY20 VR&E outcome metrics include the following: • Days to entitlement: 45 days • Positive outcomes: 68%
SEEKING DECISION REVIEW: Veteran received a decision on a claim for disability compensation and is not satisfied with the initial rating. He would like someone to conduct a de novo review of the decision; he has a need to understand his options and to select the right decision review lane. (In Higher Level Review (HLR), a more experienced reviewer looks at the evidence of record. At the end of **FY19**, VBA completed **17,972** HLR in an average of **37.0** days. Supplemental claims provide the opportunity to submit additional evidence. At the end of **FY19**, VBA completed **68,086** supplemental claims in an average of **57.8** days.)	VBA recently streamlined the decision review process with the implementation of the Veterans Appeals Modernization and Improvement Act of 2017. HCD methodology was used working with Veterans and advocates to co-create several options or "review lanes" for Veterans to choose, keeping many reviews within VBA's control. VBA plans to sustain the positive steps made in transforming VA's complex and lengthy appeals process into one that is simple, timely, and fair to Veterans and that ultimately gives Veterans choice, control, and clarity in the claims and appeals processes. VBA plans to start collecting formal feedback in 2020.	Veterans have choices in how they would like their decision review handled, and streamlined processes lead to quicker decisions. Target FY20 metrics for decision review include the following: • Average days to complete HLR: 125 days • Average days to complete supplemental claims: 125 days

Where could we improve?

Steps ⟶	1: Before applying for benefits	2: Applying for benefits	3: Keeping track of benefit status
Customer Steps Name and describe the main steps that a person takes to use the service, left to right, start to finish.	Learn about the benefits available and any eligibility criteria. Learn how, when, and where to apply for specific benefits. Determine which benefits can be applied for or used while still on active duty and which require Veteran status to begin.	Submit application for benefits and any supporting documentation. In some cases, this can be initiated online. However in others a paper application submitted via mail is required.	Check status of application/claim Understand how much eligibility/entitlement available Keep track of benefits over time (entitlement used/remaining, amount of benefit payment, etc.)
Service System Describe the channels, roles, and tools from your agency or partners.	• VA.gov or eBenefits.va.gov • MLC module provided in service • TAP Brief • Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES) program • VBA Call Center • VA Solid Start Program • Veterans Service Organization (VSO) • Local outreach event hosted by VA or community partner • Public Contact at VA Regional Office • GI Bill Comparison Tool (web based) • VA/VBA social media accounts • Speak with other TSM/Veterans	• VA.gov or eBenefits.va.gov • IDES program • VSO • In person via Public Contact at VA Regional Office • Training Institution (assistance provided by School Certifying Official) • Hard copy mailed via US Postal Service (mail to processing office)	• Online VA.gov or eBenefits.va.gov • VBA Call Center • VSO
Pain Points Describe the highest priority problems to solve	• Transition "information overload." Provide the right level of information just in time, and make it easy for TSM to reference later. • Knowing where to start. • Options for online self-service.	• Not all applications available online; many customers want to be able to apply electronically. • Entitlement criteria and documentation requirements can be confusing.	• Need more options for online self-service; customers want to be able to check status online for all benefits and/or opt in for automated digital status updates.

Where could we improve?

Steps	4: Receiving benefits	5: Changing benefit status	6: Requesting Decision Review
Customer Steps Name and describe the main steps that a person takes to use the service, left to right, start to finish.	Veteran has provided direct deposit information for any monetary benefits. S/he has received notification of entitlement amounts and is able to use benefits such as VA home loan or adaptive housing grant, education, VR&E, etc. as appropriate. **OR** Survivor has received burial allowance and life insurance benefit.	Across many benefits, this can occur multiple times in a customer's relationship with VBA. From qualifying for a different level of disability, to adding or removing dependents, to changing rate of enrollment in training.	Not all customers seek further review of a decision on their claim, however, for Veterans who do, they must select which path they want to take for that review.
Service System Describe the channels, roles, and tools from your agency or partners.	• VA.gov or eBenefits.va.gov • Banking institution • Hard copy notification sent via mail • Training institution (as applicable) • Lender (as applicable) • Construction company (as applicable) • Funeral director (as applicable) • VBA Insurance	• VA.gov or eBenefits.va.gov • National Call Center • Education Call Center • Insurance Call Center • VSO • Hard copy by mail • In person via Public Contact at VA Regional Office	• VA.gov or eBenefits.va.gov • National Call Center • VSO • Hard copy by mail • In person via Public Contact at VA Regional Office
Pain Points Describe the highest priority problems to solve	• Customers would like more options for online self-service. This includes the ability to view the amount of benefit as well as the amount of entitlement remaining over time.	• Customers would like more options to make changes via online self-service, and to know the changes have taken effect. • Changing benefit status can often result in an overpayment/debt. Customers are sometimes confused about the full financial impact the change might cause (for example, the exact amount of monthly housing allowance after a reduction in training hours). • Keeping dependency status up to date is also a pain point. Easy, effective, and timely reminders to review and update dependency status are needed.	• Customers would like to complete this transaction online. They would also like the ability to view the status of their decision review online.

Where could we improve?

7: Providing Feedback

VBA collects feedback from TSM, Veterans, and beneficiaries through a number of channels. Information is used for program and process improvement.

Customer Steps

Name and describe the main steps that a person takes to use the service, left to right, start to finish.

Service System

Describe the channels, roles, and tools from your agency or partners.

- VA.gov data
- VSignals survey (by email)
- Longitudinal and cross-sectional surveys (by mail)
- Post-Separation Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Assessment (PSTAP) Outcome Study
- User experience research and testing
- Human-Centered Design
- Focus groups
- Town Halls
- VA/VBA Social Media
- VBA Call Center data
- VSO
- Advisory Committees

Pain Points

Describe the highest priority problems to solve

9

- Survey fatigue
- Lack of consistent process and system for service recovery

What will we do?

Purpose

Why did your agency undertake this project? What does it hope to achieve, in specific performance indicators, if possible.

What is the problem?
Every year, approximately 200,000 service members transition from military service to civilian life. All are eligible to attend the TAP. TSMs face a complex and often challenging range of life issues from education, employment, finances, housing, health, mental health, and relationships to how to access and use the complex network of programs, services, and benefits they have earned.

Desired future state?
VA implements continual improvement of TAP and ensures TSMs receive the information and benefits they need in the most effective manner to improve their long-term outcomes in the life domains of employment, education, health and relationships, finances, and well-being of Veterans.

Any measurable indicators and targets?
The PSTAP provides measurable satisfaction scores across all the life domains as well as the efficiency and the effectiveness of TAP. The study is designed around Likert scale questions as well as open text comments. All the data has been combined and consolidated with other VA data sets as well as interagency partner data sets to provide a holistic profile of Veterans experience during their transition journey

Approach

Describe the timeline and work plan to achieve that purpose. If this is an ongoing initiative, describe your progress.

Process, methods, and expertise?
First ever multi-year study to determine the effectiveness of all components of TAP TSM long-term outcomes utilizing cross sectional and longitudinal assessments.

User-centered design grounded in data and stakeholder feedback.

Timeline, stage gates and dates?
Initial execution occurred in 2019 with the report completed in June 2020; the study is scheduled to occur annually through five years.
The 2020 execution began June 1, 2020 with the report expected in FY21 Q2.

Deliverables being produced?
Deliverables expected are the report, data sets and detailed action plans based on the study findings to develop, improve and enhance not only transition programs, but other VBA and Department-wide programs.

Resources

Describe the stakeholders involved, financial and human capital dedicated to the work, and any partners contributing to the work.

Who is responsible?
VBA Office of Transition and Economic Development

Who is contributing to the project?
The TAP interagency partners contributed to survey instrument development, VSOs were enlisted to assist with testing and overall study design; industry standards were utilized in the development and execution, coordination with VHA study designers and experts were incorporated into the final study products and materials.

Optional: estimated budget allocated to the work?

What are we proud of this year?

Service Improvement

Who is the user and what was the problem? I
VA makes over 1 million benefits decisions a year; historically, between 10-12% of those decisions have been appealed. VA's legacy appeal process was complex and burdensome to Veterans and beneficiaries. It did not allow the agency to act efficiently on reviewing decisions; Veterans often waited 3-7 years for a decision on an appeal.

What did you build / improve? What does it do for the public or how you deliver your mission? What was the resulting impact?
Working with Veterans and advocates using Human Centered Design (HCD), VBA simplified the decision review process and greatly improved the timeliness of processing decision reviews. VBA is exceeding its timeliness goal to complete Higher-Level Reviews and Supplemental Claims in an average of 125 days.

Any lessons for other agencies emulating this work?
VA's top leaders supported this improvement effort and dedicated resources to get it done. VA also worked collaboratively with stakeholders, involving them in process redesign and informing Congress on progress whenever possible.

Sum up what happened in two sentences.
VA simplified the decision review process, provided users more choice, and greatly improved the timeliness of processing decision reviews. VA also simultaneously prioritized the elimination of all appeals under the previous (legacy) system, reducing its legacy inventory from 396K in April 2019 to 239K only one year later.

.

Capacity Building

Was this a governance, measurement, organizational, customer understanding, service development, or service delivery capability?
VBA is continuing our focus from FY19 on customer understanding and capacity building at all levels of the organization. While building tools and training for employees at all levels, VBA is focused at the enterprise level on understanding a variety of customer journeys and using insights to improve service delivery. For decision review, VBA has mapped user journeys and made adjustments to service delivery based on direct customer input; VBA will be formalizing feedback collection in 2020.

What was the new action taken capability and it's goal or purpose?
Mapping customer journeys and implementing measurement helps VBA to gain a deeper understanding of its customers' needs and to measure their experience. In FY20/21 VBA is continuing to focus on customer understanding and gaining actionable feedback to enhance service delivery. VBA is also building capacity at all levels by training employees in HCD and using CX data for action planning.

What was the resulting impact? Include numbers whenever possible.
VBA will be launching decision review surveys in 2020 and will use the data for process improvement.

Any lessons for other agencies emulating this work?
Understanding customer journeys and pain points from their perspective has been critical to focusing resources for process improvement efforts. Mapping the journey enables VBA to deploy surveys at moments that matter to gain actionable insights.

What are we proud of this year?