

CHAPTER 2

STUDY PLAN

STRUCTURE AND INTERNAL PROCESSES OF THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

OBJECTIVE

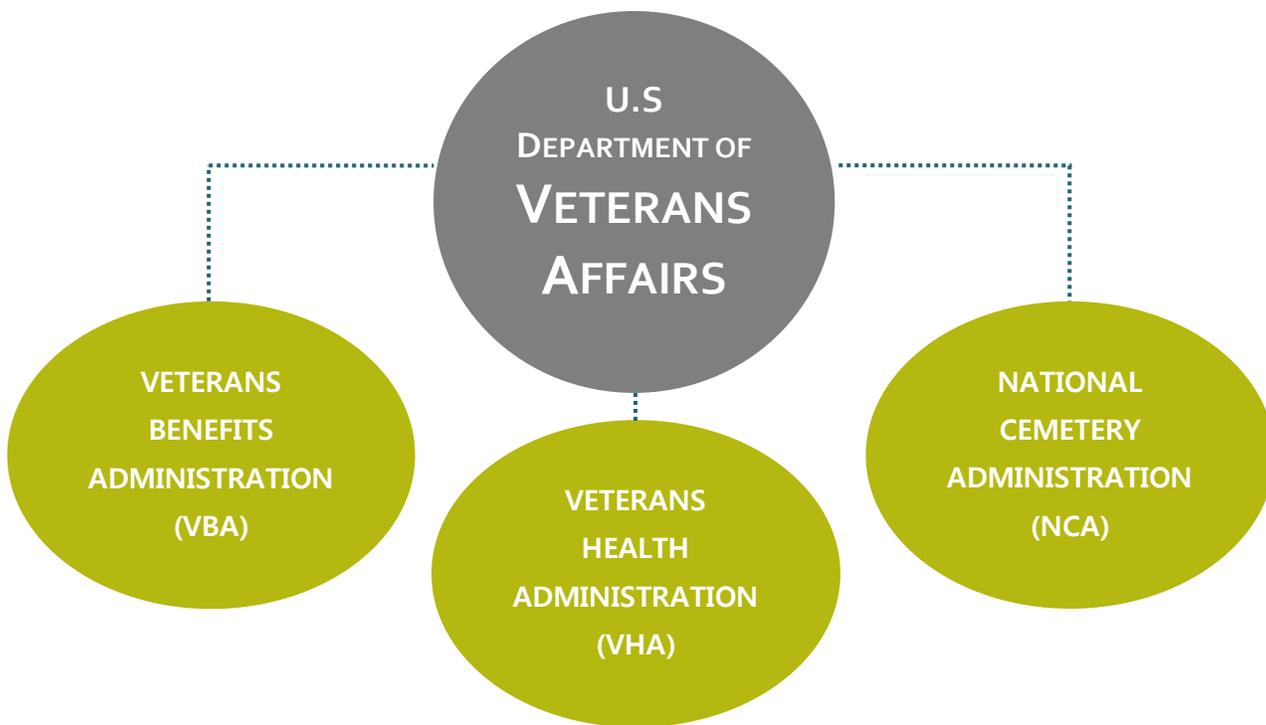
To understand the organization of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the structure and processes of the VA Regional Office (VARO) as it relates to the processing of claims for benefits, and the functions and responsibilities of each of the Veterans Service Center's units.

REFERENCES

- Adjudication Procedures M21-1MR (Manual Rewrite), Part 3, Subpart I, Chapter 1
- Veterans Benefits Manual, § 12.6.2

VA ORGANIZATION

On March 15, 1989, the Veterans Administration became a cabinet-level agency, changing its name to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. The Administrator of Veterans Affairs became the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. The new agency was composed of three primary sub-agencies, each headed by an Undersecretary: the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA); the Veterans Health Administration (VHA); and the National Cemetery Administration (NCA), plus a number of subsidiary offices and Secretariats, including the Board of Veterans' Appeals, the Office of General Counsel, and the Office of the Inspector General.



VBA administers all of the non-medical benefits programs for veterans, dependents and survivors: the compensation and pension programs; vocational rehabilitation for disabled veterans; various education and training assistance programs for veterans, dependents and survivors; loan guaranty programs for veterans and eligible surviving spouses; and a number of life insurance programs for veterans. VBA also provides a burial allowance for eligible veterans. VBA has three regional offices in California: Oakland, Los Angeles, and San Diego.

VHA provides healthcare facilities for veterans, and in some cases their dependents or survivors. It is one of the largest healthcare delivery systems in the world. Nationwide, VA operates more than 170 medical centers, more than 80% of which are affiliated with a university school of medicine. VHA averages nearly 100,000 inpatients per day. In addition, VHA operates numerous outpatient clinics, readjustment counseling centers, domiciliaries, and nursing homes. In California there are ten VA medical centers (some of which encompass more than one hospital); 60 outpatient clinics; 31 Vet Centers; and ten nursing home care units.

The **NCA** operates national cemeteries throughout the United States and its territories. There are national cemeteries in California, of which three (Riverside National Cemetery, Sacramento Valley VA National Cemetery, and San Joaquin Valley National Cemetery) are

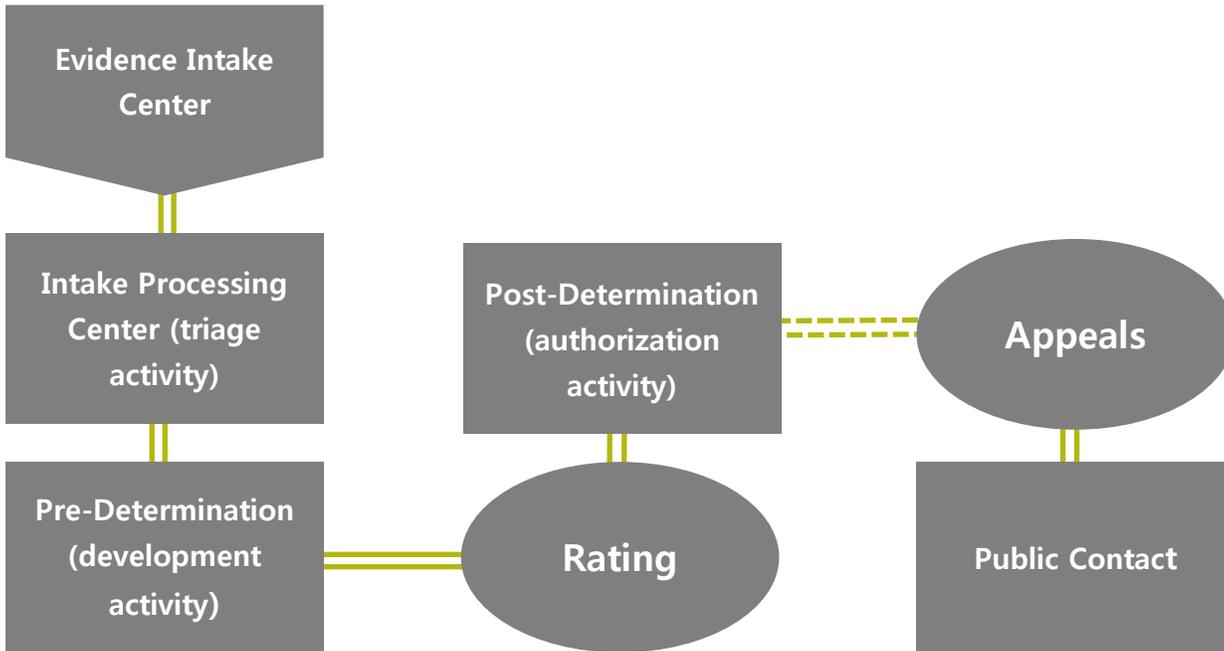
presently accepting new interments. The other national cemeteries in California are only accepting burials of family members of persons already interred, although Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery (near San Diego) still offers burial of cremated remains.

Persons eligible for burial in a National Cemetery include veterans; service-members who die on active duty; certain Reservists and National Guard members; World War II Merchant Mariners; U.S. citizens who served honorably in the Armed Forces of an allied government during a war; and such other persons or classes of persons as may be designated by either the Secretary of Veterans Affairs or the Secretary of the Air Force. The spouse or unremarried surviving spouse and the children (as defined) of eligible persons are also eligible for burial in a national cemetery.

VARO CLAIMS PROCESSING MODEL

The claims-processing initiative (CPI) model, upon which Veterans Service Centers (VSCs) are currently structured, was created in an effort to increase efficiency in processing compensation and pension claims and reduce the number of errors. This model requires triage of incoming mail and analysis of incoming claims; emphasizes the importance of complete and accurate development of claims by Veteran Service Representatives (VSRs) specially trained to do the work; and promotes specialization that improves quality and expeditious handling of claims, while at the same time allowing management the flexibility to adjust resources to meet the demands of changing workload requirements.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE VSC IS BROKEN DOWN AS FOLLOWS:



As part of the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) Transformation Project, *Segmented Lanes* were developed as a specialized approach to claims processing that more efficiently organizes claims by veterans’ contentions. Claims are now processed by assigning them to one of three lanes:

EXPRESS LANE	CORE LANE	SPECIAL OPERATIONS LANE
One and two issue claims	Three or more issue claims, or any claim not meeting express or special operations criteria	All claims requiring special handling because of their nature (e.g. military sexual trauma, former prisoner of war, traumatic brain injury)

* As of the publication of this document, the above structure reflects Oakland and San Diego Regional Offices; Los Angeles expects to move to this structure but is not yet there.

Each of these Segmented Lanes have **Claims Assistants**, **Comprehensive Screeners**, **Veterans Service Representatives (VSRs)** and **Rating Veterans Service Representatives (RVSRs)** who work in close proximity to each other in an integrated manner from start to finish throughout the claims process. Each Segmented Lane accomplishes the Pre-Determination, Rating and Post-Determination actions on a claim.

ORGANIZATION OF REGIONAL OFFICES

EVIDENCE INTAKE CENTER (EIC)

In its effort to go "paperless", VA has established two centralized EICs, one in Georgia that serves the eastern half of the country, and one in Wisconsin that serves the western half. The EICs receive mail, instead of the regional offices, and scan it into the VA system where it is sorted and sent to the CM Portal, an electronic portal, of whatever regional office has jurisdiction over the claim.

INTAKE PROCESSING CENTER (IPC) (*PREVIOUSLY REFERRED TO AS TRIAGE*)

IPC reviews scanned documents through the CM Portal and enters it into VBMS. An intake analyst determines the exact nature of veterans' claims and directs them to the appropriate lane.

As mail is received, team members are responsible for deciding:



- whether or not mail includes a claim the team can immediately process
- whether or not controls should be established using
 - Share corporate database
 - Control of Veterans Records System (COVERS)
 - Modern Award Processing Development (MAP-D)
 - Proper mail routing

The IPC undertakes no in-depth development. It processes only those claims that can be resolved at once, without the claims folder, or with minimal review of the claims folder to verify eligibility or evidence. The IPC is also responsible for supervising the files activity to ensure efficient files management for the RO.

PRE-DETERMINATION

"Pre-D's" primary function is to provide complete and timely development of claims. Its



specific responsibilities include:

- developing claims requiring administrative decisions
- preparing administrative decisions
- developing claims requiring a rating decision, including:
 - deferred rating decisions
 - inferred issues
 - newly raised issues
- determining when a claim is ready for a decision
- undertaking development necessary to complete reviews mandated by the Compensation Service

RATING

The Rating Board's primary function is to decide claims that have been certified by the development activity as ready for a decision. The Rating Board is made up of Rating Veterans Service Representatives (RVSRs) who make decisions on claims involving medical issues such as:

Veterans Service Representatives (RVSRs) who make decisions on claims involving medical issues such as:

- claims for service connection
- claims for increased evaluation of a service-connected disability
- permanent and total non-service connected disabilities for VA Pension purposes
- issues involving competency determinations
- issues involving entitlement to Special Monthly Compensation/Pension or other Special Benefits
- issues involving "Helpless Child" determinations

The **Rating Board** issues a formal rating decision on all issues claimed by the veteran. If a particular issue has not been completely developed to make a decision, that issue will be deferred and the claim will be referred back to Pre-D for additional development.

POST-DETERMINATION

"Post-D's" primary function is to process awards and notify claimants of decisions. The Post-D Team is responsible for:

- promulgating rating decisions
- preparing decision notices

NON-RATING

"Non-Rating's" primary function is to develop evidence for non-rating issues (issues that do not require the issuance of a rating decision). **Example:** Dependency, Drill Pay Withholding, Incarceration award adjustment and/or any other award adjustments.

- developing and processing non-rating end products (EPs)
- completing entitlement determinations for issues not requiring a rating decision (e.g. adding/deleting dependents, incarceration adjustments and non-service connected pension entitlements not needing a rating decision)

APPEALS

The primary function of the Appeals Team is the expeditious processing of appeals and remands. To the extent possible, it is a self-contained unit and is responsible for:

 Department of Veterans Affairs

INFORMATION AND INSTRUCTIONS FOR COMPLETING NOTICE OF DISAGREEMENT (NOD)

IMPORTANT: PLEASE READ THE INFORMATION BELOW CAREFULLY TO HELP YOU COMPLETE THIS FORM QUICKLY AND ACCURATELY. SOME PARTS OF THE FORM ALSO CONTAIN NOTES OR SPECIFIC INSTRUCTIONS FOR COMPLETING THAT PART.

THE USE OF THIS FORM IS NOT MANDATORY. HOWEVER, USING IT WILL HELP REDUCE DELAYS IN PROCESSING YOUR NOD. THIS FORM HAS SEVERAL KEY COMPONENTS WHICH WHEN FILLED OUT COMPLETELY AND ACCURATELY, WILL DECREASE THE AMOUNT OF TIME IT TAKES TO PROCESS YOUR NOD.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

For what do I use this standard NOD?
Use this form to indicate to your Regional Office (RO) that you disagree with a decision you received regarding your claim for disability compensation. Examples of these decisions may include entitlement to service connection, percentage of evaluation assigned, and effective date among other things.

Should I fill out this form?
Only fill out this form if you disagree with a decision issued by your RO. This includes an initial decision, a decision for an increased rating, or any other decision you disagree with.

Where can I get help?
You can ask the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to help you fill out the form by contacting us. Before you contact us, please make sure you gather the necessary information and materials, and complete as much of the form as you can.

What should I do when I have finished my NOD?
You should provide your signature in the block provided at the bottom of the second page. Be sure to sign every form you fill out before you send it to us. If you don't sign the form, VA will return it for you to sign, and it will take longer to process.

Attach any materials that support and explain your NOD.
Mail or take your NOD to the RO that issued the decision or notification that you disagree with, which is the Agency of Origin Jurisdiction (AOJ).

Do I need to keep a copy of this NOD form?
It is important that you keep a copy of all completed forms and materials you give to VA.

SPECIFIC INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE NOD

Part I: Personal Information
Please provide all personal contact information.

VA FORM 10-1098

- establishing and monitoring records in the Veterans Appeals Control and Locator System (VACOLS)
- developing issues on appeal
- promulgating any rating decisions stemming from appeals

Once a **Notice of Disagreement (NOD)** is submitted by an appellant to the VARO that rendered the decision (Agency of Original Jurisdiction, or AOJ), the appeal process begins. The Appeals Team has jurisdiction of the appeal until it is either granted in full, not timely perfected by the appellant, or is forwarded to the jurisdiction of the Board of Veterans' Appeals (BVA). Generally, the AOJ retains jurisdiction of the appeal even if the veteran moves to another regional office jurisdiction.

Although the **Appeals Management Center (AMC)** performs its own development on most remanded cases, the Appeals Team is otherwise responsible for developing and deciding remanded appeals in the regional office's possession.

The Appeals Team consists of its own Veterans Service Representatives (VSRs), Rating Veterans Service Representatives (RVSRs) and **Decision Review Officers (DROs)**:

THE VETERANS SERVICE REPRESENTATIVE (VSR)

- establishes Notices of Disagreement in VACOLS
- sends notification and DRO election letters to appellants
- pulls claims folders for DROs
- develops any additional evidence identified
- orders exams
- promulgates any rating decision granted by a DRO

De novo is Latin for anew. A *de novo* review means the VA will evaluate the claim without looking at the prior decision it made.

THE DECISION REVIEW OFFICER (DRO)

- makes decisions on appeals where a DRO de novo review has been elected
 - completes a rating decision on any grant of issues appealed
 - completes a Statement of the Case or Supplemental Statement of the Case on the continuation of a denial of issues on appeal
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THE RATING VETERANS SERVICE REPRESENTATIVE (RVSR)

- makes decisions on appeals that have not elected a DRO de novo review
- completes a rating decision on any grant of issues appealed
- completes a Statement of the Case or Supplemental Statement of the Case on the continuation of a denial of issues on appeal

As of the publication of this document, San Diego Regional Office and Los Angeles Regional Office currently have RVSR's working appeals: Oakland Regional Office does not have RVSR's working appeals at this time.

- holds local personal hearings when requested by the appellant, either by conducting a formal hearing or an informal conference
 - reviews all appeals for accuracy and completeness before being certified to the Board of Veterans' Appeals (BVA)
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PUBLIC CONTACT

The Public Contact Team's primary functions are to conduct personal interviews with, and answer telephone calls from, veterans and beneficiaries seeking information regarding benefits and claims. The Public Contact Team is specifically responsible for handling:

- walk-ins
- telephone calls, correspondence, and/or email responses to:
 - Veterans Assistance Inquiries (VAIs)
 - Inquiry Routing and Information System (IRIS) inquiries
 - Congressional inquiries
- providing verification of benefits received
- providing copies of documents requested through the Freedom of Information Act
- outreach issues



STUDY QUESTIONS

Using the assigned references and reading materials, answer the following questions:

1. All rating decisions are promulgated by the rating activity. (T/F)

VA Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs July 11, 2013 press release

2. Notification is received by VA that a veteran is incarcerated. Which activity is responsible for notifying the veteran and adjusting his/her award?

- a. Intake Processing Center
- b. Pre-Determination
- c. Post-Determination
- d. Appeals
- e. Non-Rating

M21-1MR, Part 3, Subpart I, Chapter 1, Subchapter 5(a)

3. A Congressional office sends an inquiry as to the status of a constituent's appeal. Responsibility for responding to this inquiry lies with the appeals activity. (T/F)

1MR, Part 3, Subpart I, Chapter 1, Subchapter 7(b)

4. Actions such as Direct Deposit, Change of Address and First Notice of Death are completed by which activity?

- a. Intake Processing Center
- b. Pre-Determination
- c. Post-Determination
- d. Public Contact

M21-1MR, Part 3, Subpart I, Chapter 1, Subchapter 2(a) and (g)

5. Which activity has the initial responsibility to determine if a VA exam is needed for a disability claim, and for ordering the exam?

- a. Intake Processing Center
- b. Pre-Determination
- c. Rating
- d. Post-Determination

M21-1MR, Part 3, Subpart I, Chapter 1, Subchapter 3(a)