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Report to the Chairman, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, U.S. Senate

September 1994

VETERANS' BENEFITS

Lack of Timeliness, Poor Communication Cause Customer Dissatisfaction

GAO/HEHS-94-179

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GAO

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Health, Education, and
Human Services Division

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September 20, 1994

The Honorable John D. Rockefeller IV
Chairman, Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate

Dear Mr. Chairman:

Because of frequent complaints about the quality and timeliness of the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) claims processing, you expressed interest in improving the quality of service VA provides to its customers. In fiscal year 1993, VA provided nearly $19 billion in nonmedical benefits to veterans and their families. You asked that we determine how applicants for benefits view the quality of VA's services.

This report summarizes the results of our 1993 national survey of 1,400 recent applicants for VA nonmedical benefits. In addition to assessing customers' overall satisfaction with VA's service, the survey highlighted concerns in several key areas, including

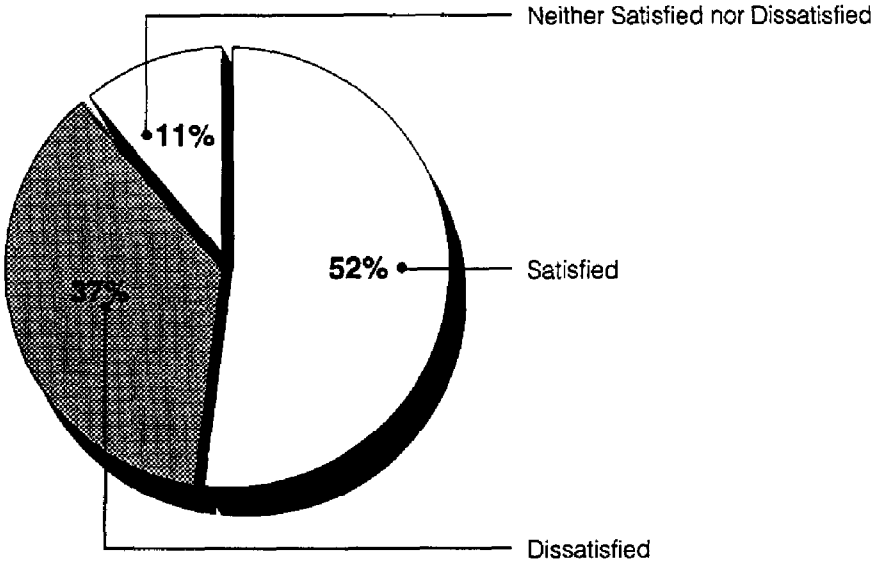
- the time it takes to process claims,
- how VA communicates with veterans and their families, and
- the frequency with which applicants have to resubmit documents to VA in support of their claims.

The survey also provided information about the extent to which (1) VA denies claims and (2) organizations other than VA, such as veterans service organizations, are involved in the claims process.

Results in Brief

Although most applicants were satisfied, over a third were dissatisfied with VA's handling of their claims. (See fig. 1.) VA has identified customer concerns and is developing approaches designed to address them. The concerns voiced by respondents to our survey have important implications for those efforts to improve customer satisfaction.

Figure 1: Applicants' Opinions About How VA Handled Their Claims



The time it takes VA to process claims was by far the greatest source of applicants' dissatisfaction, according to our survey. VA has recognized the need to speed up its claims processing and has established timeliness goals. However, even if those goals are met, many customers may remain dissatisfied because they believe processing should be completed in less time than the goals call for. For example, initial compensation applicants thought claims should be processed in an average of 9 weeks, but VA's goal for these claims is 15 weeks.

Communication with VA was another major concern for applicants. Many customers said they were dissatisfied, whether the communication was by mail, by phone, or in person. For example, 40 percent of those who visited a VA office reported they did not get the information they needed. One veteran's comment may have summed up the issue for many: "It's like you can't go to just one person and sit down and have them explain to you step by step what you need to do for whatever problem . . . ." Applicants most often wanted information about services and benefits available to them, the status of their claims, and the reasons for the decisions on their claims.

The need to resubmit documents to VA also inconvenienced applicants. Twenty-two percent of applicants had to resubmit documents at least once. Civilian documents such as marriage certificates were resubmitted most often. Resubmissions cost applicants time and money and can increase VA's workload and processing time.

Our study pointed out two other factors that may hold significant implications for VA's efforts to improve customer satisfaction. First, applicants whose claims were denied represented a significant portion—36 percent—of VA's customers. VA knows very little about who those applicants are, why their claims were denied, and what VA could do to help these people. Second, 60 percent of VA customers received service from sources over which VA has no authority, such as state and county veterans offices and veterans service organizations. The extent to which these other sources are involved highlights the need for continued communication between VA and these sources as VA seeks to improve customer satisfaction.

Scope and Methodology

To obtain the views of VA's customers, we surveyed a national random sample of 1,400 applicants. These applicants' claims were representative of the claims completed at VA's regional offices between April 1 and July 13, 1993, for nine types of benefit claims. Appendix I provides more details on our scope and methodology; appendix II provides a copy of the questionnaire and customer responses.

We also conducted two focus groups, one with veterans who applied for disability compensation and one with veterans' survivors who applied for initial death pension benefits. We spoke with representatives of veterans service organizations, including the American Legion, Blinded Veterans Association, Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, and Veterans of Foreign Wars. In addition, we telephoned and visited state and county veterans offices in Alabama, Florida, and Georgia.

To obtain information about VA's current operations and efforts to improve services, we reviewed VA's policies and procedures, data relative to claims processing and timeliness standards and goals, current customer survey efforts, and documentation outlining VA plans and efforts to address customer and congressional concerns. We also met with VA officials at the Washington, D.C., headquarters and at VA's regional offices in Atlanta, Georgia; Montgomery, Alabama; New York City, New York; St. Petersburg, Florida; and Washington, D.C.

This report summarizes responses from applicants for nine types of claims. Appendix III provides more detailed information about, and highlights some differences among, the nine types of claims. Our review was conducted from December 1992 to June 1994 and was performed in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Background

VA's Veterans Benefits Administration is responsible for administering benefit programs, such as disability compensation and pension. Veterans and their families can apply for benefits through any of VA's 58 regional offices.[1] Veterans and their families also may seek assistance with VA benefits from a variety of sources, such as state and county veterans offices and veterans service organizations. Other sources provide assistance with specific benefits, such as funeral home directors with burial benefits and school officials with education benefits.

VA has recognized the need to improve services to veterans and is taking steps designed to do so. Much of the emphasis has been on improving timeliness of claims processing and reducing the backlog of claims, which increased from 107,000 in 1988 to over 520,000 in 1993. VA has recognized, for example, that it does not efficiently obtain documents necessary to decide claims, it does not effectively control its records, and many staff are not sufficiently trained.

VA has undertaken three long-term initiatives. First, in December 1992, VA awarded a contract to implement a modernization plan designed to improve operations through automation.[2] Second, VA is implementing total quality management and is encouraging each regional office to develop locally appropriate restructuring initiatives to improve operations. VA's third major effort focuses on disability claims, which are usually the most difficult and time consuming to process. In November 1993, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs approved a package of recommendations designed to improve processing of those claims. He gave regions until May 1995 to develop plans to implement those recommendations and make other changes to improve claims processing.

[1]VA regional offices are located in each state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Republic of the Philippines. New York, Texas, and Pennsylvania have two regional offices each, and California has three.

[2]After we pointed to the need for improved planning and oversight of VA's modernization efforts, VA signed an agreement with the Office of Management and Budget to redirect its efforts. See Veterans Benefits: Acquisition of Information Resources for Modernization Is Premature (GAO/IMTEC-93-6, Nov. 4, 1992) and Veterans Benefits: Redirected Modernization Shows Promise (GAO/AIMD-94-26, Dec. 9, 1993).

To help it develop short- and long-term goals, VA conducted, by telephone, a customer satisfaction survey between October and November 1992. In January 1994, VA published results for five programs: the Veterans Assistance Service, which is responsible for answering customer inquiries by phone or in person; compensation benefits; vocational rehabilitation; and two insurance programs.[3] Although the response rates for these surveys were relatively low, the findings were in many ways similar to ours. VA intends to use survey findings to help establish priorities for future service improvements and to develop goals and standards.

Processing Time Is a Critical Concern for Applicants

The time VA takes to process claims was the greatest complaint among those customers we surveyed.[4] Fifty percent of customers indicated timeliness should be improved. This was the major concern regardless of the type of claim, whether VA approved the claim, and the applicants' gender, age, or education level.

Processing time historically has been a problem for VA, and it is getting worse.[5] VA officials acknowledged this and attributed increased processing time to several factors that are unlikely to change, such as the greater complexity of claims.

In October 1992 VA officials set goals for how long it should take to process claims for fiscal year 1993. Those goals generally represent improvement over actual processing times during a baseline period, but the goals do not always meet customer expectations for reasonable processing time. VA's goals for four types of compensation and pension claims were longer than the average time customers said was reasonable for processing claims. For example, VA's goal for processing initial disability compensation claims is an average of 15 weeks. But applicants reported that, on average, initial compensation claims should be processed in 9 weeks. (See fig. 2.) VA's 1992 telephone survey of customers found

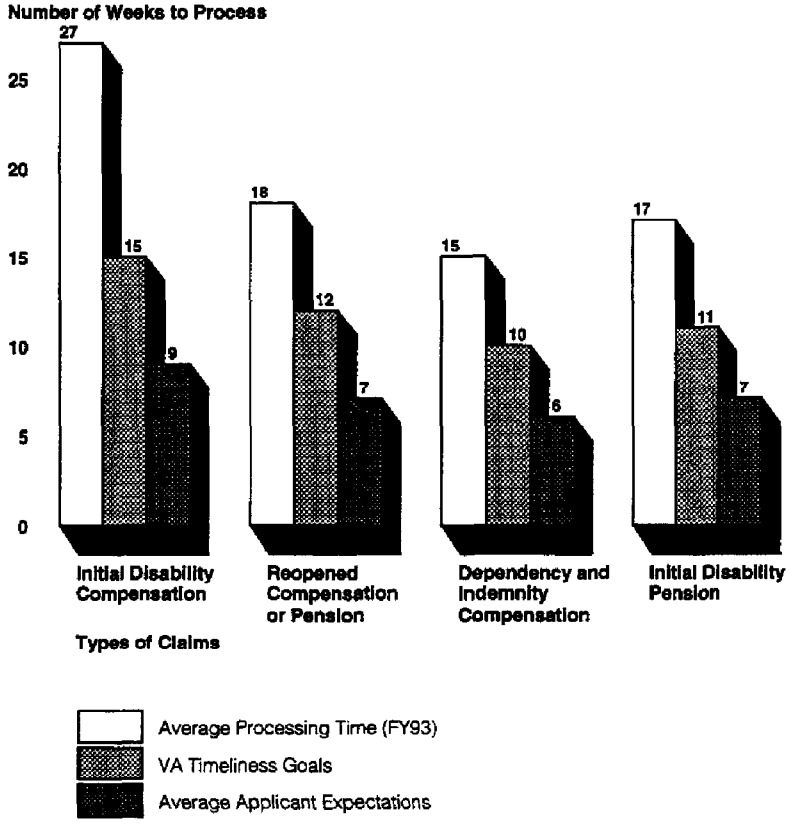
[3]VA surveyed customers about nine programs in all, but does not anticipate publishing results for four of these programs because response rates were too low or surveys could not be completed because of technical difficulties.

[4]Applicants for compensation claims were generally most dissatisfied with timeliness and the other aspects of service discussed in this report. But, as the tables in appendix III show, troublingly large portions of applicants for other types of benefits expressed similar concerns about key aspects of service.

[5]Compensation and pension claims present the biggest problem. In 1989, we reported that VA took too long to process these claims (see Veterans' Benefits: Improvements Needed in Processing Disability Claims, GAO/HRD-89-24, June 22, 1989). In 1988, initial disability compensation claims—generally considered the most complicated—on average took 21 weeks to process. In fiscal year 1993, they averaged 27 weeks.

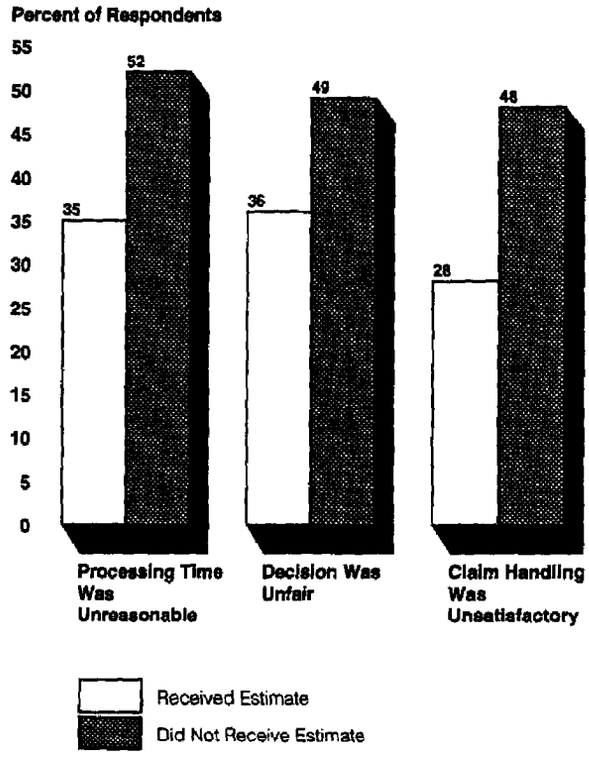
similar expectations. On average, respondents in VA's survey said they should get a final decision from VA regarding a compensation claim in 10 weeks.

Figure 2: VA Not Meeting Customer Expectations



Our survey also indicated that VA practices may affect applicants' satisfaction level. Those who were not given an estimate of how long it would take to process their claims were generally less satisfied. They were more likely to indicate that VA's processing time was unreasonable, that VA's decision was unfair, and that they were dissatisfied with how VA handled their claims. Over 40 percent of applicants reported VA did not provide any estimate of when their claims would be decided; VA policies do not require an estimate to be given. (See fig. 3.)

Figure 3: Satisfaction Levels of Those Who Received Estimates and Those Who Did Not



However, giving an applicant an estimate of processing time can backfire when the estimate is unrealistic. In that case, applicants' dissatisfaction levels can increase. For example, one compensation applicant said he had been told it would take 5 to 6 months to process his claim, but instead it took about 12 or 13 months. The applicant said that had VA given him a realistic estimate of the processing time, he would not have been so dissatisfied and would not have repeatedly called VA to check on the status of his claim. VA officials agreed that providing realistic estimates may also reduce VA's workload since customers would not telephone VA to ask about claim status until the estimated time had elapsed.[6]

[6]Our data did not allow us to determine the reasonableness of the estimates VA gave our respondents because we did not have the actual processing time for each case.

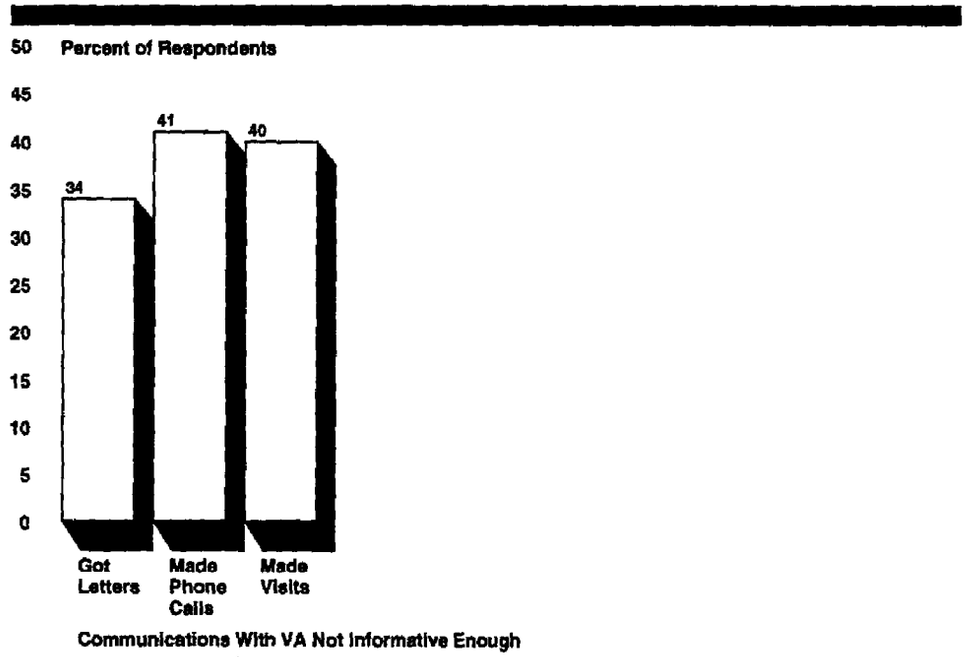
Customers Often Dissatisfied With Communication With VA

Many applicants were dissatisfied with their communication with VA. Some did not receive required communications from VA. Others did not get the information they needed whether the communication was by letter, phone call, or personal visit. Poor communication greatly increases the potential for dissatisfaction among customers and increases VA's workload.

Many customers did not receive letters that VA is required to provide. Overall, about 34 percent of applicants did not indicate that they were informed by letter that their application had been received, and 38 percent of applicants whose claims had been completed did not indicate they received a letter stating that from VA.

Of those who said they received letters from, phoned, or visited VA, over one-third did not get most of the information they needed. (See fig. 4.) Applicants were most interested in VA (1) explaining the services and benefits that are available, (2) keeping them informed on the status of their claims, and (3) explaining the reasons for decisions. One applicant said it would have been helpful if VA had told him what information they used to decide his claim. "That way," he said, "when I appealed it, I would know what to send them—what additional information I needed to send." Other applicants said they would like "an indication of the amount of time it might reasonably take for benefits to reach the person" or "more information on the questions [the applicants] asked—not general information."

Figure 4: VA Often Does Not Provide Most of the Information Applicants Need



For those who sought informational materials from VA, the results were similar. Of the 50 percent of our sample who requested informational materials, more than one-quarter did not get them. Of those who received the informational materials they requested, about one-quarter told us that these materials did not contain most of the information they needed.

Despite not getting what they needed, over 80 percent of applicants said that VA employees were courteous. And it appears courtesy helps mitigate applicants' dissatisfaction. One applicant said, "Their phone service is fine. They were helpful in telling me they knew nothing about when my claim would be finished." Likewise, discussion in our focus groups indicated many problems with VA service, but some participants gave VA a high overall rating, citing courteous and friendly employees as the reason. Our survey results also point to the positive effect of courtesy. For example, applicants who contacted VA by phone and reported that employees were courteous were more likely to be satisfied (57 percent) overall with VA's handling of their claims than dissatisfied (33 percent).

The quality of VA communications with customers has been a long-standing problem.[7] VA is developing approaches to address some of the problems raised in our survey. For example, VA is testing a variety of software programs to allow written communications, including decision letters, to be more informative and clearer. VA also is implementing a plan to change claims processing; in some regions, changes allow applicants to directly contact the employees most knowledgeable about their claims. This is a significant departure from the traditional way claims are processed. Furthermore, by February 1994 VA had begun sending form letters to applicants every 90 days indicating that their claims were still in process. While these changes are potentially significant, they may not address situations where customers did not get information required or requested or where veterans and their families need to understand benefits and services before they apply.

Many Applicants Had to Resubmit Documents

Having to resubmit documents to support a claim adds to customer dissatisfaction and the time it takes to process a claim. Twenty-two percent of applicants had to resubmit a document. Applicants who resubmitted documents were more likely to be dissatisfied than those who did not have to resubmit. For example, 48 percent of those who resubmitted records were dissatisfied, overall, with how VA handled their claim, compared with 31 percent of those who did not have to resubmit records.

Sixteen percent of applicants had to resubmit civilian documents, such as birth certificates or marriage licenses, rather than military medical or service records. Resubmitting civilian documents involves time and expense on the part of the applicants. The following comments illustrate the frustration some applicants felt.

"I have received as many as six demands for marriage certificates and birth certificates all within days from each other . . . . I am afraid to call the regional office anymore because every time I do I get treated like it's my first contact with them, and the barrage of record requests starts all over again."

"I hand-delivered records [DD214-personal medical records] and they took photostats and verified them only to have them say 19 days later that they never received them . . . . The confusion in the system leaves something to be desired . . . . I feel I lost to a system and confusion."

[7]Our 1989 report found several shortcomings in VA's communication with customers. For example, we found that VA decision notices did not provide a clear and full explanation for VA actions and decisions.

VA officials recognize this problem and identified some reasons applicants may need to resubmit documents. One reason is that when documents are submitted, they are not matched with the applicant's claim file. This can happen if the applicant does not provide the right information, such as social security numbers, for VA to determine which file the document goes with. Or VA might not be able to find the file. VA's current processing procedures require a file to be handled by many different employees in many different locations, and files are misplaced. VA is beginning to implement a bar code system to allow regional offices to better track the location of claim files within each region.

Another reason applicants have to resubmit documents is that they do not understand VA's document requirements. Particularly, some applicants do not understand that VA requires certified, not photocopied, documents. To confirm this, one VA regional official telephoned 12 applicants who had been sent the usual form letter to request documents. Nine of the 12 applicants said that they had not understood from the letter that VA wanted certified copies of those documents, not photocopies. All of those applicants then provided certified copies of the documents. If those applicants had not been telephoned, at least some of them would have sent uncertified documents. If they had, VA's usual procedure would have been to send the same form letter requesting the same documents. Some VA regional offices are changing procedures to allow employees to call applicants to clarify what documents are needed. Moreover, legislation has been introduced to eliminate the requirement that documents be certified, and even without such legislation, VA is revising its regulations to allow photocopies, rather than certified copies, for some purposes, such as showing marriage or death.

Survey Indicates Other Factors to Consider in Improvement Efforts

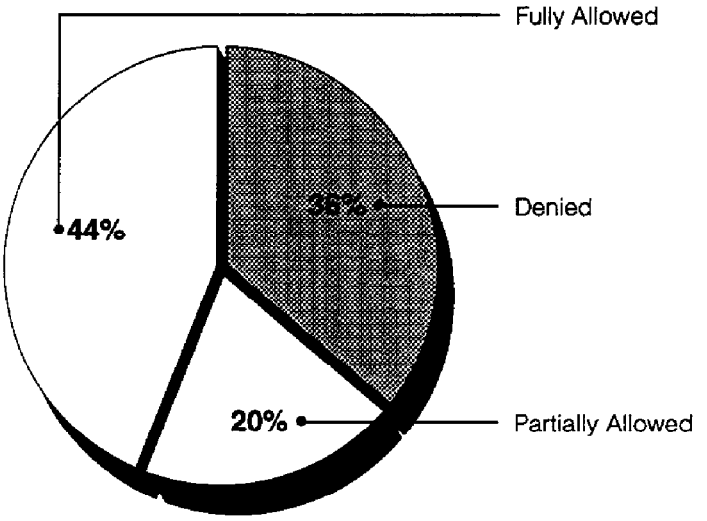
Our survey also highlighted two additional factors that could affect VA's efforts to improve customer satisfaction. First, applicants whose claims are denied, about whom VA has little information, constitute a large portion of VA's customer base. And, second, many people other than VA staff influence applicants' satisfaction with the claims process.

Information About Denied Claims Could Be Valuable for Improving Services

Applicants whose claims were denied represent a substantial portion of VA's customers, but VA knows little about them. These applicants were consistently less satisfied and had more difficulty with all aspects of the process.

Of those applicants who told us their claims were completed,[8] 36 percent had been denied. (See fig. 5.)

Figure 5: How Applicants' Claims Were Decided



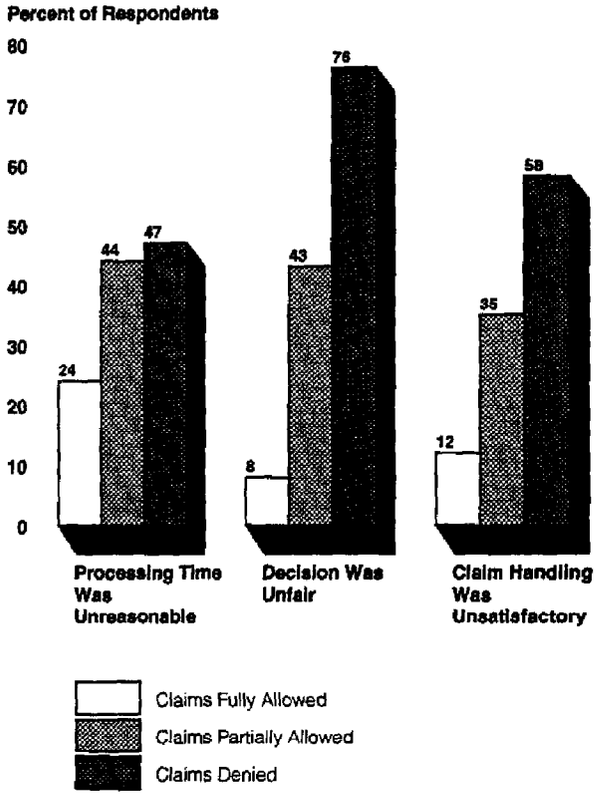
Note: "Partially allowed" refers to those applicants who got some of the benefits they asked for, but not all.

Figure excludes the 20 percent of our respondents who said their claims had not been completed.

Those whose claims were denied represented 45 percent of all applicants who were dissatisfied. Their dissatisfaction levels with timeliness, fairness, and overall processing of the claims were higher than those of applicants whose claims were fully allowed. (See fig. 6.)

[8]Eighty percent of respondents indicated that their claims had been completed, that is, VA had fully allowed, partially allowed, or denied their claims. The other 20 percent reported that their claims were still pending, they did not know if their claims had been decided, or, for some other reason, their claims were not final.

Figure 6: Applicants' Opinions About VA, by How Their Claims Were Decided

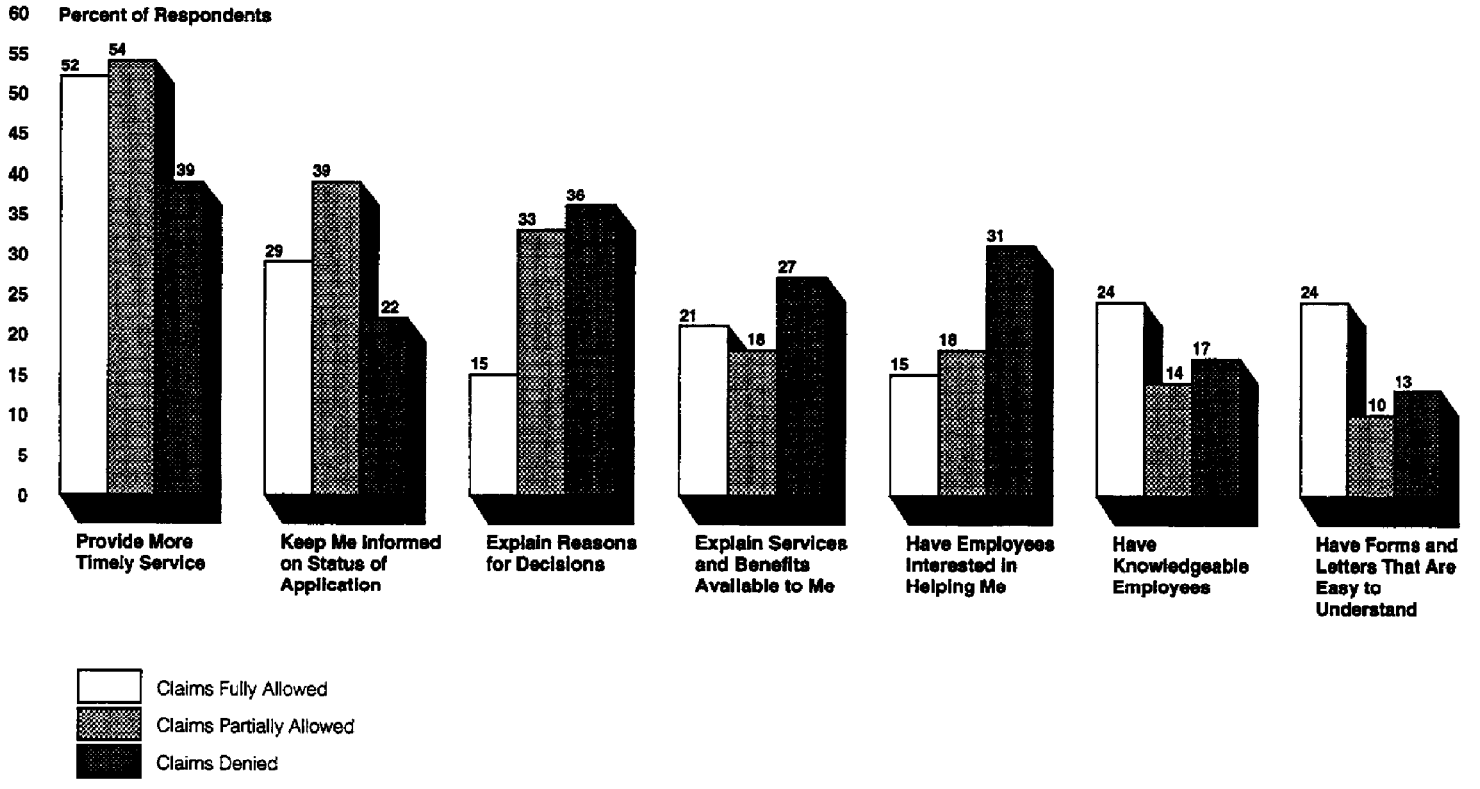


Denied applicants had more trouble with the claims process than those whose claims were fully allowed. For example

- They were less likely to have gotten informational materials they requested (61 percent for denied claims versus 93 percent for fully allowed claims).
- They were more likely to say informational materials did not include most of what they needed to know (33 percent versus 12 percent).
- They were more likely to indicate the letters from VA did not contain most of what they needed to know (55 percent versus 12 percent).
- They were more likely to state that telephone conversations with VA did not give them most of what they needed to know (64 percent versus 19 percent).
- They were more likely to state that visits to VA offices did not give them most of what they needed to know (68 percent versus 14 percent).

The areas identified by applicants whose claims were denied as most needing to be improved mirrored those identified by applicants overall. However, they were more concerned about improving explanations of decisions and the helpfulness of employees. (See fig. 7.)

Figure 7: Ways Applicants Said VA Should Improve Service



VA has little information about these denied applicants. For example, until our survey, VA did not know what portion of all applications are denied and, until its most recent customer survey, VA did not include the views and concerns of applicants whose claims were denied in assessing customer satisfaction.

VA does not keep data on denied claims that could allow it to assess the implications of our survey's findings or the adequacy of services it provides to these applicants. Data could, for example, allow VA to determine the following for denied applicants:

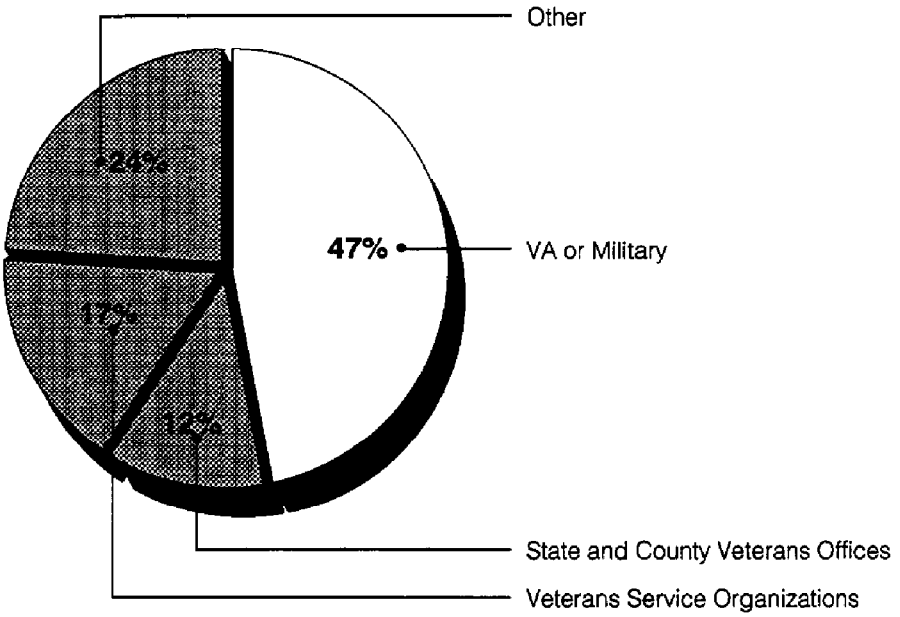
- Did those who did not obtain help in filing their claim want such help? The answer has implications for VA's outreach efforts.
- Did they apply for benefits for which they clearly were not eligible? The answer has implications for changes in VA's informational materials, as demonstrated by one respondent's comment: "The information about eligibility was misleading. More specific [information] would probably have resulted in my not filing a claim."
- Did those who received letters about denials understand them, and if not, why? The answer has implications for what kinds of changes VA needs to make in those letters.
- Were their claims frequently denied because records could not be found to support the claims? The answer has implications for assessing, and possibly improving, VA's efforts to assist applicants in filing claims, including assistance in finding other sources of support.

Many People Other Than VA Staff Assist VA's Customers

Many applicants receive assistance from sources not under VA's authority. VA is part of a network that supports veterans and their families that includes state and county offices, veterans service organizations, and others. About 60 percent of applicants receive services from these other sources, sometimes in addition to getting help from VA. VA officials said that applicants seek help from other sources because these sources are more numerous and geographically dispersed than the 58 VA regional offices.

Over half of all applicants reported first learning about benefits from someone other than VA or the military. These sources most frequently were veterans service organizations, state and county veterans offices, and friends or relatives. (See fig. 8.)

Figure 8: How Applicants First Learned About Benefits

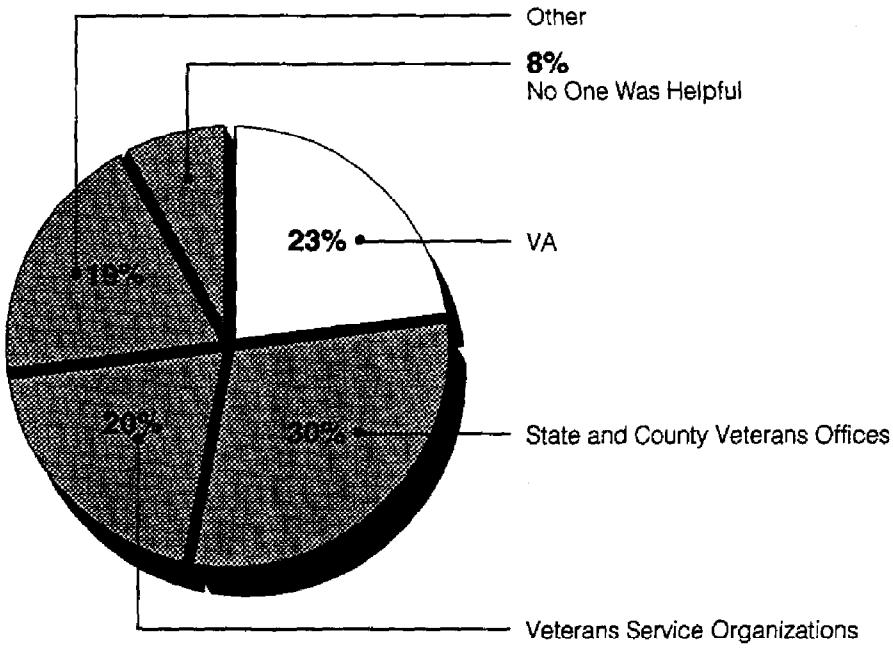


Notes: Excludes those who answered, "I don't recall."

"Other" includes, for example, a friend or relative, funeral home or cemetery staff, and school officials.

These and other sources also helped with the claims process, usually in filling out the application or filing the claim. More than half of respondents said someone other than VA was the most helpful. (See fig. 9.)

Figure 9: Sources Applicants Said Helped the Most



Note: "Other" includes, for example, a friend or relative, funeral home or cemetery staff, and school officials.

Applicants had high praise for these other sources.

"[The veterans service organization] representative crossed off the areas of the form I didn't have to complete. Had he not done this, the form would have been very difficult."

"I don't know what I would do without our state service officer to help me. She handles all my VA material and questions."

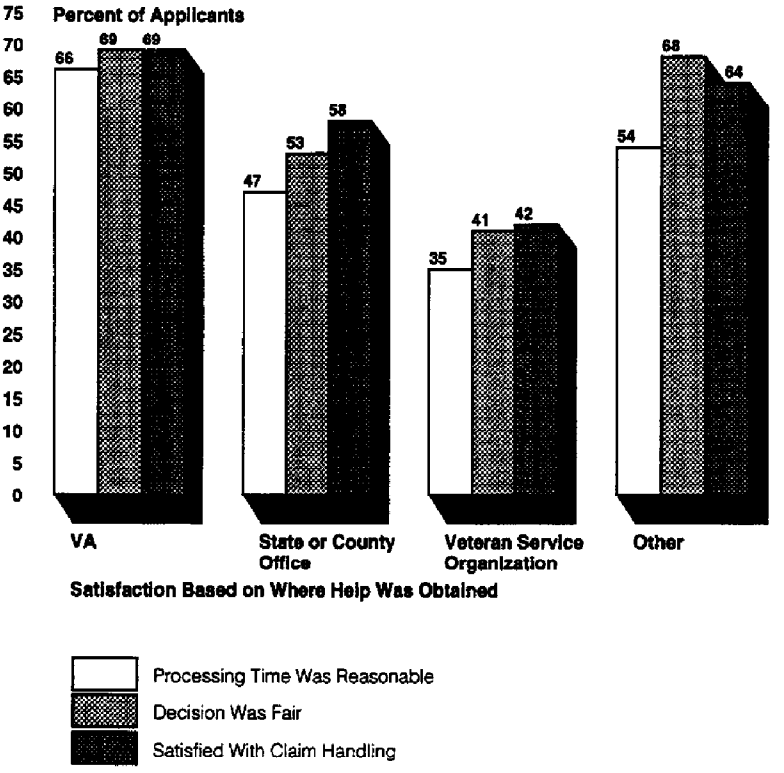
"I didn't fill out these forms. The manager from the shelter care home either did them or had them done."

"[The] assistant at school already knew how to fill out the forms."

"[The] funeral director filled out all the information. I just answered his questions and signed the papers."

Those who found someone other than VA to be most helpful to them were less likely to be satisfied with VA's service overall. On the other hand, those who found VA most helpful generally were more satisfied with various aspects of the process. (See fig. 10.)

Figure 10: Applicants' Satisfaction Level, by Where They Obtained Help



Note: "Other" includes, for example, a friend or relative, funeral home or cemetery staff, and school officials.

The reasons satisfaction with VA's service was lower for those who received the most help from non-VA sources are not clear. Were these applicants dissatisfied with VA before they contacted the other sources? Were there problems with the services these other sources provided or with the expectations they gave applicants about VA's service? Did applicants seek help outside VA for the more complex, difficult to support claims that are more likely to take longer and raise frustration levels? The

answers to these questions would lead to different actions to improve service and satisfaction. The extent to which these sources are involved highlights the need for VA to fully understand who gets what help from them and why.

VA recognizes the important role these organizations play, but some VA officials expressed surprise at the extent of involvement we found. Officials said they make aggressive outreach efforts to these other sources. For example, representatives from some of these sources were part of a panel charged with recommending improvements in disability claims processing. Additionally, VA sponsors conferences attended by state and county officers; however, with tighter budgets some local officers have not been able to attend these meetings. VA officials indicated that the quality of the service provided by these other sources can vary and that sometimes VA does not have enough informational materials to send other sources.

Conclusions

Our survey pointed to several key problems with the service VA regional offices provide to veterans and their families. VA has recognized those key problems—its own customer survey highlighted similar issues—and is attempting to find ways to address them. But some of these concerns are long-standing and only time will tell if VA's efforts will be successful.

Of major concern is that even if VA meets its new timeliness goals, many veterans will not be satisfied. While it may not be advisable to set current goals based solely on customer expectations of what is reasonable—if those expectations are not attainable in the foreseeable future—VA's long-term efforts should be directed at meeting customer expectations. These efforts should include determining what changes will be needed to meet customer expectations. In the short term, our survey suggests that VA may be able to improve satisfaction by better communicating realistic time estimates to applicants. This and other efforts to improve communication could have a major impact on customers' perceptions of VA's service.

The substantial extent to which claims are denied and to which service is provided by non-VA sources was not previously known. Though it may not be surprising that applicants whose claims were denied are less satisfied with VA's service, the fact that these applicants constitute an estimated one-third of VA's customers suggests more detailed information about them could be useful in improving service. Similarly, the extent to which other sources provide assistance to applicants strongly suggests these sources

can have a substantial impact on customers' satisfaction with the claims process and perceptions about VA. As VA takes steps to change its claims processing system, it will be important for VA to continue communicating and coordinating with these sources, to know what assistance these sources are giving, and to ensure that these sources have the up-to-date information necessary to assist applicants.

Recommendations

The Secretary of Veterans Affairs should direct the Under Secretary for Benefits to

- set long-term goals to meet customer expectations for processing times, and prepare a plan describing the incremental steps necessary to meet them,
- provide applicants realistic estimates about how long it will take to complete their claims, and
- develop data on applicants whose claims are denied so VA can ensure that segment of its customers gets the best service possible.

Agency Comments

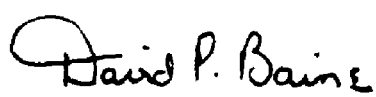
In a letter dated August 3, 1994, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs commented on a draft of this report. (See app. IV.) He stated that VA agreed with each of our recommendations and outlined some actions VA is considering to implement them. Absent more details and time frames, however, we cannot assess the potential of the proposed actions to improve customer satisfaction.

The Secretary also pointed out that our report data on the failure of customers to obtain needed information from federal VA employees may be subject to misinterpretation. He stated that his department's customers do not always know when they are contacting a federal VA office or a state or county VA office. Consequently, he believes the failure to provide information to a customer may not have been the federal VA's fault, but rather one of the state and county offices. We agree that some respondents to our questionnaire may not have differentiated between federal and state or county VA offices. VA's comment is particularly pertinent because it confirms the significance of the concern we raised in this report about the extent to which sources other than federal VA offices are involved in providing services and their impact on quality of services and customer satisfaction.

Finally, the Secretary expressed concern that our sampling technique overlooked claims that were closed quickly. Our sample was drawn from claims completed between April 1, 1993, and July 13, 1993. VA believes this sampling technique overlooked claims filed after April 1 and closed before July 13. VA believes these applicants would be among those most satisfied with VA's service because their claims were completed so quickly. However, because our sample was representative of claims completed during this period and VA told us this period was typical of other periods, our universe included claims that were completed in a short time. For example, if a claim had been filed on March 30 and closed April 2, it would have been included in our universe and could have been selected in our sample for review.

We are sending copies of this report to interested congressional committees, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and other interested parties. This work was done under the direction of Flora Milans, Associate Director. If you have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-7101. Other major contributors are listed in appendix V.

Sincerely yours,



David P. Baine
Director, Federal Health Care
Delivery Issues

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Abbreviations

VA Department of Veterans Affairs

Scope and Methodology

To obtain the views of the Department of Veterans Affairs' customers—veterans, their dependents, and survivors—we surveyed a national random sample of 1,400 applicants. These applicants' claims were representative of the approximately 245,000 claims completed at VA's regional offices between April 1 and July 13, 1993, for 9 types of benefit claims. We included claims for the following:

- Initial Disability Compensation Benefits. These benefits are paid to veterans who are disabled by injury or disease incurred or aggravated during active military service in the line of duty.
- Disability and Death Dependency Benefits. These include among others, increased benefits for children attending school after the age of 18, increases for additional dependents, or adjustments in benefits because of marriage, divorce, or death. These actions can be initiated by VA or by the claimant.
- Initial Dependency and Indemnity Compensation Benefits. These benefits are awarded to the surviving spouses, certain dependent children, and in some cases the parents of veterans who died on active duty or from a disability that was service connected. Surviving spouses and children may also receive dependency and indemnity compensation benefits when totally disabled veterans die from non-service-connected causes.
- Burial Benefits. These benefits include statutory burial allowances, plot allowances, and in some cases, reimbursement for expenses for headstones, markers, or engraving expenses.
- Initial Disability Pension Benefits. These needs-based benefits are provided to veterans with limited income who served during wartime and have become totally and permanently disabled from causes not connected to their military service.
- Initial Death Pension Benefits. These needs-based benefits are provided to the surviving spouses and children of wartime veterans who died from causes not connected to military service.
- Education Benefits. These benefits are provided to active duty and selected reserve personnel, veterans, and their eligible dependents.
- Vocational Rehabilitation Benefits. These benefits are provided to eligible disabled veterans who have demonstrated that service-connected disabilities make rehabilitation training necessary to overcome impairments in finding or retaining employment. (Cases in our sample included two types of claims: (1) those filed to determine eligibility for vocational rehabilitation benefits and (2) those filed to obtain actual benefits.)

We also included

- Reopened Claims for Compensation and Pension Benefits. These include, among others, claims for benefits VA previously denied, increased disability compensation benefits, additional disabilities, and benefits granted through a successful appeal to the Board of Veterans Appeals.

We did not include as part of our customer survey two other major nonmedical benefit programs offered by VA. The home loan guaranty program was not selected because the national database of those who take advantage of this benefit does not contain sufficient information on each loan to allow us to draw a valid national sample. Veterans life insurance programs were not selected because claims processing is limited to only two regional offices: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and St. Paul, Minnesota.

To determine our universe, we compared VA's work-in-progress database[9] on April 1, 1993, with the same database on July 13, 1993. Claims that were in process in April that did not appear in July were considered completed claims, and we drew our sample from these claims. VA told us that this period was representative of VA's workload throughout the year.

We sent questionnaires to random samples of applicants for each of the nine types of benefit claims listed previously.[10] The survey was administered anonymously, and individual responses could not be linked to the actual respondent. The questions we asked were based, in part, on discussions with VA officials, veterans service organizations, state officials, and veterans and their families. The final questionnaire was sent to VA for comments. We tailored the questionnaires only to enable us to ask the same questions to all nine groups (for example, applicants for compensation benefits or burial benefits). A sample questionnaire showing aggregate responses and percentages is included in appendix II. Table I.1 shows the universe of potential claims, the sample size, and the number of questionnaires received by strata.

[9]VA uses the work-in-progress subsystem to track all claims in process at any given time. In a recent report on claims processing, the VA Inspector General commented that the subsystem's data are generally reliable enough to be useful in controlling and monitoring work flow. Although the Inspector General's report found about one-third of the records it reviewed were inaccurate in some way, these inaccuracies did not affect the integrity of our sample.

[10]If the same applicant was selected in more than one strata (that is, the claimant had more than one type of claim in process), we sought information on only one type of claim.

Table I.1: Universe of Potential Claims, Sample Size, and Questionnaires Received by Strata

Type of benefit claim	Universe[a]	Sample	Respondents[b] Total	Respondents[b] Recall
Initial disability compensation	37,525	200	141	134
Disability and death dependency	22,654	200	144	100
Initial dependency and indemnity compensation	5,074	100	88	81
Burial	16,712	100	71	58
Initial disability pension	9,967	200	145	132
Initial death pension	6,887	100	78	71
Education	29,436	200	135	124
Vocational rehabilitation eligibility and rehabilitation benefits	38,608	100	68	45
Reopened compensation and pension	77,977	200	155	146
Total	244,840	1,400	1,025	891

[a]Universe: Numbers reflect total number of claims completed by VA during the period from April 1 through July 13, 1993, for the nine types of benefit claims included in our review.

[b]Respondents: "Total" represents the number of questionnaires returned that were not blank or did not indicate the applicant had died. "Recall" is the number of questionnaires returned on which the applicant recalled having had contact with VA concerning the claim in our sample. This represents the number of usable responses.

We obtained an overall response rate across all nine strata of 73 percent. Response rates for individual strata varied from a low of 67.5 percent for education claims to a high of 88 percent for initial dependency and indemnity compensation claims. Because these samples are representative, the statistics we cite based on the survey are estimates for the population of all veterans, their spouses, and their dependents who had claims completed by VA from April 1 through July 13, 1993. We calculated sampling errors for estimates from this survey at the 95-percent confidence level. This means that the chances are about 19 out of 20 that the actual percentage being estimated falls within the range defined by our estimate, plus or minus the sampling error. Generally, the sampling errors did not exceed 5 percentage points when addressing all strata combined.

To determine if the nonrespondents were significantly different from those who responded to our questionnaire, we obtained information about those who did not respond. First, we developed a geographic profile and found that the geographic distribution of the nonrespondents was similar to the distribution of the respondents. Second, because claim status (for

example, approved or denied) was strongly correlated with satisfaction, we determined the disposition of the nonrespondents' claims. We found that the percentage of denied claims was similar to the percentage of denied claims for those who responded. Our limited analysis found nothing that would indicate that their responses would be significantly different from those who returned our questionnaire.

Finally, about 10 percent of those who responded to our survey indicated that their claims were still pending, even though VA's data indicated that the claims had been completed. We included their responses because these applicants had been able to complete the questionnaire and had opinions about VA's service. Since our questionnaire was administered anonymously, we could not follow up on any individual cases. However, we believe some of those who told us that their cases were pending had in fact appealed VA's decision on their original claim. Other reasons for this response could be that the VA data on the disposition were inaccurate, the claimant never received a letter on the disposition of the claim, the disposition letter was still in process, the claimant had received conditional or partial approval of the claim, or the claimant had more than one claim in process.

Summary of Responses to GAO's Survey of Applicants for VA Benefits

United States General Accounting Office

GAO

1993

Questionnaire on Your Satisfaction with VA's (See note 1, below) Claims Process

NOTE 1 This questionnaire was mailed to 1,400 people who, according to the Department of Veteran Affairs, had some action taken on one of nine different categories of veteran benefits. With the exception of tailoring references to the name of the benefit associated with the individual, questions for each type of beneficiary were identical. For simplicity of display, this copy of the questionnaire substitutes *(veteran's)* for each reference made to a particular type of benefit. The names of the nine benefits used in the nine tailored versions were:

Compensation
Disability and Death Dependency
Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC)
Burial
Pension
Death Pension
Education
Vocational Rehabilitation
Reopened Compensation/Pension

NOTE 2 ***n = number*** appears at the end of each question; these numbers are the unweighted numbers of people in our sample who answered a particular question. ***Answers*** for each question are expressed as the cumulative, weighted response across the nine strata. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

U.S. General Accounting Office

Questionnaire on Your Satisfaction with VA's *(veteran's)* Claims Process

- **What is the General Accounting Office (GAO)?**
  The U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) is an agency of the U.S. Congress.

- **What is this survey about?**
  The Congress has asked GAO to assess veterans', their dependents' or their survivors' level of satisfaction with the process of applying for nonmedical benefits administered through the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Your answers, combined with the answers of others answering this questionnaire, will be one measure of the level of satisfaction people have with VA's benefit application process and identify areas in the process that could be improved.

- **Is the VA doing this survey?**
  No. It's being done by GAO at the request of the Congress. GAO will summarize the results and give a report to Congress.

- **Why was I picked?**
  You were picked because you were one of many persons for whom the VA recently processed a *(veteran's)* claim this year.

- **Why should I answer these questions?**
  Because you have personal experience with the VA and its benefit claims process, you can help improve the process for yourself in the future as well as help other veterans and their dependents and survivors.

- **Will my answers affect my current or future VA benefits?**
  No. Your answers will not affect your current or future benefits. Because there is nothing on this questionnaire that can identify you, we will not be able to tell how you answered the questionnaire; **your answers are completely anonymous.**

- **How can I be sure my answers will remain anonymous?**
  Because there is nothing on this questionnaire that can identify you. To ensure your privacy, after you complete the questionnaire, you will mail the enclosed postcard separately from the questionnaire. The postcard will go to our Atlanta, Georgia, Regional Office to let us know you returned the questionnaire. Your questionnaire will go to our Washington, DC, headquarters. There is no way we can match the postcard with the questionnaire.

- **If I have questions about this questionnaire, is there someone who can answer them?**
  Yes. Call Cynthia Forbes, collect, at 404-679-1900 in our Atlanta Regional Office.

Read and answer this question first.

According to their records, earlier this year, VA made a decision or took some action on a ❁ for you. Do you recall asking VA to take some action for you on this benefit? *(Check one.) n=1025*

87% Yes *(Continue to question 1)*

13% No——————>***STOP.*** *You do not have to complete this questionnaire, but please return this questionnaire in the enclosed, self-addressed envelope and separately mail the enclosed, self-addressed postcard.*

1. This booklet contains questions about your recent experiences with VA. Specifically, we are interested in your experiences concerning a *(veteran's)* matter about which VA made a decision or took an action earlier this year. Please answer the questions in this booklet based on your experiences relating to this decision or action.

   In what month and year did you contact VA regarding this matter about which VA made a decision or took an action earlier this year? *(Write the month and year.)*

   Month: _____ Year: _____

2. When you applied to VA, did VA give you an estimate of how long it might take to give you a response? *(Check one.) n=874*

   1. ***43%*** Yes *(Continue to question 3.)*
   2. ***40%*** No——————>***Go to question 4.***
   3. ***15%*** Can't recall——————>***Go to question 4.***

3. How many weeks did VA tell you it would probably take to process your application? *(Enter the number of weeks or check the box.) n=321*

   Range= 1-91 weeks

   number of weeks: _____

   Median=8 weeks

   ☐ Can't recall ***n=76***

4. Regardless of how long VA took or how long you were told it might take, about how many weeks do you think is reasonable for VA to take to process this type of application? *(Enter the number of weeks or check the box.) n=669*

   Range= 1-52 weeks

   number of weeks: _____

   Median=4 weeks

   ☐ Don't know or unable to estimate ***n=204***

Continue to the next page——————>

Remember: *Base your answers only on your experience with the matter identified in question 1.*

5. ***Please Note:*** Because there are many reasons why people contact VA, some of the remaining questions contain the general word "claim" to represent the matter about which you contacted VA. For example, "claim" might mean applying for a new benefit or requesting a change in an existing benefit.

   Your "claim" is whatever it was that you requested or applied for from VA on the date you entered in question 1 and upon which VA took action earlier this year.

   Did VA fully allow, partially allow or deny your *(veteran's)* claim earlier this year? (Check one.) ***n=871***

   1. ***35%*** Fully allowed
   2. ***16%*** Partially allowed
   3. ***29%*** Denied
   4. ***10%*** No decision, still pending
   5. ***5%*** Don't know or not sure
   6. ***5%*** Other *(Please explain, below.)*

   . . . . . .

   . . . . . .

6. How did you first learn about the *(veteran's)* benefit? (Check one.) ***n=833***

   1. ***10%*** From VA literature.
   2. ***10%*** From a Federal VA employee.
   3. ***11%*** From a State or county veterans office employee.
   4. ***17%*** From someone in a veterans' organization (for example, VFW, American Legion or DAV).
   5. ***10%*** From a friend or relative.
   6. ***4%*** &From a school official.
   7. ***25%*** From the military while in service.
   8. ***<1%*** From television, radio or magazine.
   9. ***4%*** I don't recall.
   10. ***9%*** From someone else or some other way. *(Please tell us who or how you learned about this benefit.)*

   . . . . . .

   . . . . . .

7. Who, if anyone, helped you with your *(veteran's)* claim? *(You may check more than one.)* ***n=876***

   1. ***28%*** Federal VA employee helped me.
   2. ***26%*** State or county veterans office employee helped me.
   3. ***22%*** Veterans' organization service officer (for example, VFW, American Legion or DAV) helped me.
   4. ***6%*** Friend or relative helped me.
   5. ***10%*** &School official helped me.
   6. ***4%*** Someone else helped me.
   7. ***18%*** No one helped me.——————>***Go to question 10.***

8. In which of the following ways did the person(s) or organization(s) help you? *(You may check more than one.)* ***n=736***

   1. ***46%*** Gave me information about benefits I might be entitled to.
   2. ***68%*** Helped me to file the claim.
   3. ***51%*** Helped me to fill out the application.
   4. ***26%*** Helped me to get evidence or documents to support my claim.
   5. ***22%*** Helped me to get information about the status of my claim.
   6. ***27%*** Explained documents or letters VA sent to me.
   7. ***5%*** Other *(Please describe, below.)*

   . . . . . .

   . . . . . .

9. Which one of the following helped you the most with your claim? *(Check one.)* ***n=707***

   1. ***24%*** Federal VA employee
   2. ***30%*** State or county veterans office employee
   3. ***20%*** Veterans' organization (for example, VFW, American Legion or DAV)
   4. ***5%*** Friend or relative
   5. ***10%*** &School official
   6. ***4%*** Someone else
   7. ***8%*** None was very helpful

Remember: *Base your answers only on your experience with the matter identified in question 1.*

[redacted]

10. Did you try to get any informational materials from VA about *(veteran's)* claims? *(Check one.)* ***n=874***

    1. ***50%*** Yes *(Continue to question 11.)*
    2. ***50%*** No——————>*Go to question 16.*

11. Did you get any of the informational materials you wanted from VA? *(Check one.)* ***n=424***

    1. ***74%*** Yes *(Continue to question 12.)*
    2. ***26%*** No——————>***Go to question 15.***

12. About how long after you requested the materials did you receive them? *(Enter the number of days or check a box.)* ***n=316***

    Range= 1-365

    number of days: _____

    Median= 9 days

    32% As soon as I asked for them.
    28% Can't recall

13. How easy or difficult were those informational materials to understand? *(Check one.)* ***n=322***

    1. ***30%*** Very easy
    2. ***40%*** Somewhat easy
    3. ***15%*** About as easy as difficult
    4. ***12%*** Somewhat difficult
    5. ***4%*** Very difficult

14. Overall, did the informational materials contain all or almost all, most, some, or little or none of what you needed to know? *(Check one.)* ***n=324***

    1. ***34%*** All or almost all I needed to know
    2. ***43%*** Most of what I needed to know
    3. ***20%*** Some of what I needed to know
    4. ***3%*** Little or none of what I needed to know

15. Is there anything you would like VA to do to improve VA's informational materials? *(Please write your suggestions in the space below.)* ***n=164***

Continue to the next page——————>

Remember: *Base your answers only on your experience with the matter identified in question 1.*

[redacted]

16. Did you, with or without help, fill out an application form for your *(veteran's)* claim? *(Check one.)* ***n=850***

    6% There was no application form.–>***Go to Part D, page 5.***

    1. ***78%*** Yes *(Continue to question 17.)*
    2. ***16%*** No———>***Go to Part D, page 5.***

17. How easy or difficult was the application form to understand? *(Check one.)* ***n=638***

    1. ***26%*** Very easy
    2. ***42%*** Somewhat easy
    3. ***19%*** About as easy as difficult
    4. ***11%*** Somewhat difficult
    5. ***2%*** Very difficult

18. Did you read the instructions that came with the *(veteran's)* claim application form? *(Check one.)* ***n=633***

    5% There were no instructions.–>***Go to question 20.***

    1. ***85%*** Yes *(Continue to question 19.)*
    2. ***10%*** No———>***Go to question 20.***

19. How easy or difficult were the instructions to understand? *(Check one.)* ***n=474***

    1. ***26%*** Very easy
    2. ***46%*** Somewhat easy
    3. ***16%*** About as easy as difficult
    4. ***9%*** Somewhat difficult
    5. ***2%*** Very difficult

20. Is there anything you would like VA to do to improve its forms and instructions? *(Please write your suggestions in the space below.)* ***n=140***

Remember: *Base your answers only on your experience with the matter identified in question 1.*

The questions in this section concern records and documentation you (or your family) had to provide to VA to support your *(veteran's)* claim. We have categorized these records and documentation into three different types:

- Military medical records
- Military service records
- Civilian records

Military medical records

21. Did VA need any military medical records to support your claim? *(Check one.) n=847*

    1. ***53%*** Yes *(Continue to question 22.)*
    2. ***46%*** No——>***Go to question 27.***

22. Did you (or your family) get any of the military medical records, or did someone else get all of them for you? *(Check one.) n=370*

    1. ***54%*** I (or my family) got some or all of the records *(Continue to question 23.)*
    2. ***46%*** Someone else got all of the records——>***Go to question 26.***

23. How easy or difficult was it for you (or your family) to get the military medical records or documents for your claim? *(Check one.) n=229*

    1. ***38%*** Very easy
    2. ***23%*** Somewhat easy
    3. ***12%*** About as easy as difficult
    4. ***9%*** Somewhat difficult
    5. ***18%*** Very difficult

24. Did VA ask you to resubmit any military medical records that you (or your family) had already given to them? *(Check one.) n=230*

    1. ***29%*** Yes
    2. ***71%*** No

25. About how much time did it take you (or your family) to get all of your military medical records? *(Enter a number or check the box.) n=199*

    Range= 0-156

    number of weeks: _____

    Median= 1 week

    19% Military medical records never found or still waiting for them

26. About how many weeks do you think it should take to get military medical records? *(Please enter a number or check the box.) n=366*

    Range= 0-30

    number of weeks: _____

    Median= 2 weeks

    29% Don't know or unable to estimate.

Military service records

27. Did VA need any military service records to support your claim? *(Check one.) n=846*

    1. ***56%*** Yes *(Continue to question 28.)*
    2. ***44%*** No——>***Go to question 33.***

28. Did you (or your family) get any military service records, or did someone else get all of them for you? *(Check one.) n=476*

    1. ***65%*** I (or my family) got some or all of the records *(Continue to question 29.)*
    2. ***36%*** Someone else got all of the records——>***Go to question 32.***

29. How easy or difficult was it for you (or your family) to get the military service records for your claim? *(Check one.) n=323*

    1. ***48%*** Very easy
    2. ***26%*** Somewhat easy
    3. ***11%*** About as easy as difficult
    4. ***6%*** Somewhat difficult
    5. ***9%*** Very difficult

Continue to the next page——>

Remember: *Base your answers only on your experience with the matter identified in question 1.*

30. Did VA ask you to resubmit any military service records that you had already given to them? *(Check one.)* ***n=346***

    1. ***26%*** Yes
    2. ***74%*** No

31. About how much time did it take you (or your family) to get all of your military service records? *(Enter a number or check the box.)* ***n=267***

    Range= 0-156

    number of weeks: _____

    Median= <1 week

    11% Military service records never found or still waiting for them

32. How many weeks do you think it should take to get military service records? *(Enter a number or check the box.)* ***n=435***

    Range= 0-52

    number of weeks: _____

    Median= 2 weeks

    36% Don't know or unable to estimate.

Civilian records

33. Did VA need any civilian records to support your claim, such as birth certificates, marriage licenses, divorce decrees, adoption papers, civilian medical records, etc.? *(Check one.)* ***n=848***

    1. ***50%*** Yes *(Continue to question 34.)*
    2. ***51%*** No——————>***Go to question 36.***

34. Overall, how easy or difficult was it for you (or your family) to get the civilian records for your claim? *(Check one.)* ***n=457***

    1. ***45%*** Very easy
    2. ***25%*** Somewhat easy
    3. ***12%*** About as easy as difficult
    4. ***11%*** Somewhat difficult
    5. ***7%*** Very difficult

35. Did VA ask you to resubmit any civilian records you (or your family) had already given to them? *(Check one.)* ***n=448***

    1. ***33%*** Yes
    2. ***68%*** No

36. Is there anything you would like VA to do to improve the process VA uses to collect records for claims? *(Please write your suggestions in the space below.)* ***n=204***

Remember: *Base your answers only on your experience with the matter identified in question 1.*

37. Did you receive any letters from VA about your *(veteran's)* claim? *(Check one.)* ***n=869***

    1. ***84%*** Yes *(Continue to question 38.)*
    2. ***16%*** No——————>***Go to question 43.***

38. What kinds of information did you receive in these letters from VA? *(You may check more than one.)* ***n=756***

    1. ***68%*** VA notified me that they had received my application.
    2. ***34%*** VA notified me of the status of my application.
    3. ***24%*** VA requested more information.
    4. ***65%*** VA notified me that my application had been approved or denied.
    5. ***11%*** Other kinds of information *(Please describe the kinds of information you received in VA letters, below.)*

    . . . . . .

    . . . . . .

39. How easy or difficult to understand were the letters VA sent to you? *(Check one.)* ***n=756***

    1. ***49%*** Very easy
    2. ***31%*** Somewhat easy
    3. ***11%*** About as easy as difficult
    4. ***7%*** Somewhat difficult
    5. ***2%*** Very difficult

40. Overall, did the letters you received from VA contain all or almost all, most, some, or little or none of what you needed to know about your *(veteran's)* claim? *(Check one.)* ***n=750***

    1. ***40%*** All or almost all I needed to know
    2. ***27%*** Most of what I needed to know
    3. ***19%*** Some of what I needed to know
    4. ***15%*** Little or none of what I needed to know

41. Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with VA's letters? *(Check one.)* ***n=751***

    1. ***30%*** Very satisfied
    2. ***31%*** Somewhat satisfied
    3. ***12%*** About as satisfied as dissatisfied
    4. ***11%*** Somewhat dissatisfied
    5. ***17%*** Very dissatisfied

42. Is there anything you would like VA to do to improve their letters? *(Please write your suggestions in the space below.)* ***n=162***

Continue to the next page——————>

Remember: *Base your answers only on your experience with the matter identified in question 1.*

43. Did you ever try to reach VA by phone about your *(veteran's)* claim? *(Check one.)* ***n=870***

    1. ***52%*** Yes *(Continue to question 44.)*
    2. ***48%*** No——————>***Go to question 51.***

44. Which of the following, if any, were reasons why you phoned VA? *(You may check more than one.)* ***n=453***

    1. ***28%*** I wanted information before I filed.
    2. ***10%*** VA employee asked me to call.
    3. ***19%*** I was unable to take care of my business in person.
    4. ***6%*** I was unable to take care of my business by mail.
    5. ***69%*** I wanted to know what the status of my claim was.
    6. ***26%*** I had questions about topics other than the status of my claim.
    7. ***10%*** I had more information to give VA.
    8. ***11%*** Other reason(s) *(Please describe the reason or reasons, below.)*

    . . . . . .

    . . . . . .

45. About how many times, whether you got through or not, did you try phoning VA about your claim? *(Enter the number of times you estimate you phoned.)* ***n=409***

    Range= 1-95
    _____ times tried phoning
    Median= 3 times

46. When VA answered your call, about how often did you talk with someone from VA who was able to help you? *(Check one.)* ***n=444***

    1. ***36%*** All of the time
    2. ***19%*** More than half of the time
    3. ***18%*** About half of the time
    4. ***19%*** Less than half of the time
    5. ***9%*** Never——————>***Go to question 50.***

47. How courteous or discourteous were VA employees when they spoke to you on the phone? *(Check one.)* ***n=423***

    1. ***57%*** Very courteous
    2. ***24%*** Somewhat courteous
    3. ***14%*** About as courteous as discourteous
    4. ***4%*** Somewhat discourteous
    5. ***1%*** Very discourteous

48. Overall, how helpful, if at all, were VA employees on the phone? *(Check one.)* ***n=425***

    1. ***35%*** Very helpful
    2. ***30%*** Generally helpful
    3. ***12%*** Moderately helpful
    4. ***14%*** Somewhat helpful
    5. ***9%*** Not at all helpful

49. Overall, did the telephone conversations with VA result in your getting all or almost all, most, some, or little or none of what you needed to know about your *(veteran's)* claim? *(Check one.)* ***n=422***

    1. ***33%*** All or almost all I needed to know
    2. ***27%*** Most of what I needed to know
    3. ***22%*** Some of what I needed to know
    4. ***19%*** Little or none of what I needed to know

50. Is there anything you would like VA to do to improve their phone service? *(Please write your suggestions in the space below.)* ***n=136***

Remember: *Base your answers only on your experience with the matter identified in question 1.*

51. Did you ever visit a federal (not state) VA office regarding your *(veteran's)* claim? *(Check one.)* ***n=872***

    1. ***37%*** Yes *(Continue to question 52.)*
    2. ***63%*** No——————>***Go to question 58.***

52. About how many miles away from where you live is that federal (not state) VA office? *(Enter the number of miles or check the box. Estimates are acceptable.)* ***n=300***

    Range= 1-700

    _____ miles

    Median= 24 miles

    4% Don't know or unable to estimate

53. Which of the following, if any, were reasons why you visited the federal VA office? *(You may check more than one.)* ***n=301***

    1. ***53%*** To apply for the benefit.
    2. ***27%*** I was asked to come to the office.
    3. ***4%*** I could not reach VA by telephone.
    4. ***25%*** I was unable to take care of my business using the telephone.
    5. ***13%*** I was unable to take care of my business using the mail.
    6. ***27%*** I wanted to know what the status of my claim was.
    7. ***24%*** I had questions other than the status of my claim.
    8. ***16%*** I had more information to give to VA.
    9. ***17%*** Other reason(s) *(Please describe the reason or reasons, below.)*

    . . . . . .

    . . . . . .

    . . . . . .

54. How courteous or discourteous were VA employees when you visited the office? *(Check one.)* ***n=300***

    1. ***61%*** Very courteous
    2. ***23%*** Somewhat courteous
    3. ***9%*** About as courteous as discourteous
    4. ***5%*** Somewhat discourteous
    5. ***2%*** Very discourteous

55. Overall, how helpful, if at all, were VA employees when you visited the office? *(Check one.)* ***n=302***

    1. ***45%*** Very helpful
    2. ***27%*** Generally helpful
    3. ***11%*** Moderately helpful
    4. ***11%*** Somewhat helpful
    5. ***7%*** Not at all helpful

56. Overall, when you visited the VA office, did your visits result in your getting all or almost all, most, some, or little or none of what you needed to know about your *(veteran's)* claim? *(Check one.)* ***n=300***

    1. ***29%*** All or almost all I needed to know
    2. ***31%*** Most of what I needed to know
    3. ***20%*** Some of what I needed to know
    4. ***20%*** Little or none of what I needed to know

57. Is there anything you would like VA to do to improve their in-person contacts? *(Please write your suggestions in the space below.)* ***n=57***

Continue to the next page——>

Remember: *Base your answers only on your experience with the matter identified in question 1.*

[redacted]

58. Given what you know about your claim, how reasonable or unreasonable was the length of time it took VA to arrive at a decision about your claim? *(Check one.)* ***n=857***

    1. ***20%*** Very reasonable
    2. ***27%*** Somewhat reasonable
    3. ***12%*** About as reasonable as unreasonable
    4. ***18%*** Somewhat unreasonable
    5. ***23%*** Very unreasonable

59. How fair or unfair do you believe VA's decision was regarding your claim? *(Check one.)* ***n=829***

    1. ***33%*** Very fair
    2. ***20%*** Somewhat fair
    3. ***7%*** About as fair as unfair
    4. ***12%*** Somewhat unfair
    5. ***28%*** Very unfair

60. Regardless of how fair or unfair you believe VA's decision was, now think only about how VA handled your claim. Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with how VA handled your claim? *(Check one.)* ***n=853***

    1. ***29%*** Very satisfied
    2. ***23%*** Somewhat satisfied
    3. ***11%*** About as satisfied as dissatisfied
    4. ***13%*** Somewhat dissatisfied
    5. ***24%*** Very dissatisfied

61. Think about your experience with VA concerning your *(veteran's)* claim. From the list below, which three things would you most like to see VA focus on to improve service to people like yourself? ***n=762***

    (Check up to three items.)

    1. ***50%*** Provide service in a more reasonable amount of time.
    2. ***15%*** Have my records available when they are needed.
    3. ***11%*** Have employees who treat me with courtesy and respect.
    4. ***19%*** Have employees with the knowledge to answer my questions.
    5. ***20%*** Have employees who are interested in helping me.
    6. ***17%*** Have forms and letters that are easy to understand.
    7. ***30%*** Keep me informed on the status of my application.
    8. ***13%*** Ask me at one time for all the information needed to support my claim.
    9. ***12%*** Make it easier to reach VA by telephone.
    10. ***5%*** Make it easier to reach VA in person.
    11. ***8%*** Keep accurate records.
    12. ***12%*** Require less paperwork from me.
    13. ***23%*** Explain the services and benefits available to me.
    14. ***24%*** Explain the reasons for decisions.
    15. ***8%*** Other important item(s). *(Please describe, below.)*

    . . . . . .

62. Think about other federal agencies that serve the public. Compared to those federal agencies, how would you rate VA's service to the public? *(Check one.)* ***n=834***

    1. ***19%*** Much better
    2. ***21%*** Somewhat better
    3. ***34%*** About the same
    4. ***9%*** Somewhat worse
    5. ***6%*** Much worse

    . . . . . .

    6. ***11%*** No opinion

63. Relative to the compensation benefit claim discussed in this questionnaire, are you the veteran, the spouse of the veteran, widow or widower of the veteran, son or daughter of the deceased veteran, or the custodian of the veteran's spouse, widow, widower or children? *(Check one.)* ***n=873***

1. ***78%*** I am the veteran
2. ***5%*** I am the spouse of the veteran
3. ***8%*** I am the widow or widower of the veteran
4. ***4%*** I am the son or daughter of the veteran
5. ***2%*** I am the custodian of the veteran's spouse, widow, widower or children
6. ***2%*** Other *(Please describe)*

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

64. Have you ever filed any other nonmedical claims with VA? *(Check one.)* ***n=856***

1. ***26%*** Yes
2. ***74%*** No

65. What is your sex? *(Check one.)* ***n=874***

1. ***77%*** Male
2. ***23%*** Female

66. Did you graduate from high school? *(Check one.)* ***n=869***

1. ***83%*** Yes
2. ***17%*** No

67. How old were you on your last birthday? *(Enter number.)* ***n=868***

Range= 18-96

_____ years old

Median= 45 year old

68. We realize these questions may not have covered everything you might have wanted to cover. Therefore, we encourage you to take a few moments to tell us (1) what VA does well in handling benefit claims and (2) how VA could improve the way they handle claims. ***And please accept our thanks for participating in this survey!***
n=396

Please complete and return this questionnaire within the next 2 weeks to:

Frank Guido
U.S. General Accounting Office
NGB/HRD-IS 4th floor
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Estimates of Applicants' Views by Claim Type

The tables and figures in this appendix provide information by individual types of claims included in our survey for the major issues discussed in this report. In many cases the differences between claim types are not statistically significant.[11] However, some clear patterns emerge. Most notably, applicants for compensation-related benefits were more likely to be dissatisfied and had more difficulties with the claims process. For example, applicants for initial disability compensation or those who had reopened compensation and pension claims

- were the most dissatisfied with VA timeliness, fairness, and overall handling of the claim (tables III.1, III.2, and III.3);
- had the largest difference between their expectations for timeliness and the goals VA set (table III.4); and
- were less likely to obtain the information they needed from VA through letters, telephone calls, and personal visits (tables III.8, III.9, and III.10).

Conversely, applicants for burial and education benefits were generally more satisfied and had fewer problems with the process.

Our survey was not intended to provide a full explanation for why applicants for some benefits are more satisfied than others. However, disability compensation claims tend to be more complicated and take longer to resolve than other types of claims and, therefore, may be more likely to cause frustration and dissatisfaction. In contrast, education and burial claims are relatively straightforward, take less time to resolve, and may therefore be less likely to cause frustration. Furthermore, applicants for burial and education benefits were the least likely to be denied and, as discussed in the report, being denied is highly correlated with dissatisfaction.

This appendix also provides information by individual types of claims on whether applicants received estimated processing times, required letters, and informational materials from VA (tables III.5, III.6, and III.7). Other tables cover the resubmission of civilian records (table III.11); claims fully allowed, partially allowed, and denied (table III.12); how applicants first learned about VA benefits (table III.13); and sources applicants found to be the most helpful in filing their claims (table III.14). Figure III.1 highlights what applicants said they would most like VA to improve.

[11]As discussed in appendix I, the sampling errors when discussing all types of claims generally did not exceed plus or minus 5 percentage points. However, sampling errors for individual types of claims differed. (See fig. III.2). Data for vocational rehabilitation claims are not shown in the tables and figures in this appendix because generally there were too few usable responses to allow meaningful analysis.

Table III.1: Applicants' Opinions About Time VA Took to Process Claims (Question 58)

Percentages

Type of claim	Reasonable	About as reasonable as unreasonable	Unreasonable
Initial disability compensation	41	14	45
Disability and death dependency	44	11	44
Initial dependency and indemnity compensation	51	19	30
Burial	64[a]	9	26
Initial disability pension	51	8	41
Initial death pension	50	17	33
Education	57	13	30
Reopened compensation and pension	39	14	47
All claims	47	12	41

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

[a]Sampling error exceeds plus or minus 12 percentage points. See figure III.2.

Table III.2: Applicants' Opinions About Fairness of VA's Decisions (Question 59)

Percentages

Type of claim	Fair	About as fair as unfair	Unfair
Initial disability compensation	40	8	52
Disability and death dependency	58	5	36
Initial dependency and indemnity compensation	53	10	37
Burial	78	12	10
Initial disability pension	44	12	45
Initial death pension	51	14	35
Education	77	6	18
Reopened compensation and pension	40	6	54
All claims	53	7	40

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Table III.3: Applicants' Opinions About How VA Handled Their Claims (Question 60)

Percentages

Type of claim	Satisfied	About as satisfied as dissatisfied	Dissatisfied
Initial disability compensation	47	12	40
Disability and death dependency	55	13	33
Initial dependency and indemnity compensation	55	11	34
Burial	79	10	12
Initial disability pension	58	10	32
Initial death pension	63	6	31
Education	66	12	22
Reopened compensation and pension	42	11	47
All claims	53	11	37

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Table III.4: How Applicants' Expectations Compared With Fiscal Year 1993 Processing Times and Timeliness Goals (Question 4)

Weeks

Type of claim	Average processing time	VA timeliness goals	Average applicant expectations
Initial disability compensation	27	15	9
Disability and death dependency	4	4	7
Initial dependency and indemnity compensation	15	10	6
Burial	5	4	6
Initial disability pension	17	11	7
Initial death pension	10	6	7
Education (original)[a]	2	4	4
Reopened compensation and pension	18	12	7

Note: Timeliness goals do not meet customer expectations for four of the eight types of claims shown above, but are shorter than expectations for three types. For one, the goal is longer than the 1993 actual time.

[a]The average processing time for education claims was calculated for original claims completed between October 1993 and April 1994. VA's timeliness standard for original claims is completion of 80 percent of claims within 30 days and for subsequent changes, completion of 90 percent within 30 days. Applicant expectations calculated from our survey include both original education claims and subsequent changes.

Table III.5: Applicants Given Estimated Processing Times (Question 2)

Percentages

Type of claim	Yes	No	Can't recall
Initial disability compensation	54	33	14
Disability and death dependency	34	50	16
Initial dependency and indemnity compensation	50	35	15
Burial	37[a]	46[a]	18
Initial disability pension	49	39	12
Initial death pension	46	35	19
Education	57	30	13
Reopened compensation and pension	39	48	14
All claims	44	41	15

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

[a]Sampling error exceeds plus or minus 12 percentage points. See figure III.2.

Table III.6: Applicants Who Did Not Receive Letters VA Is Required to Send (Questions 37 and 38)

Percentages

Type of claim	Did not receive notice that application had been received[a]	Did not receive notice that application had been approved or denied[b]
Initial disability compensation	29	23
Disability and death dependency	31	29
Initial dependency and indemnity compensation	31	22
Burial	34[c]	39[c]
Initial disability pension	30	28
Initial death pension	31	21
Education	37	34
Reopened compensation and pension	38	46
All claims	34	35

[a]Excludes applicants who did not use an application form to apply for benefits (question 16).

[b]Excludes applicants whose claims had not been finalized (question 5).

[c]Sampling error exceeds plus or minus 12 percentage points. See figure III.2.

Table III.7: Applicants Who Requested and Received Informational Materials and Said Materials Did Not Tell Them What They Needed to Know (Questions 10, 11, and 14)

Percentages

Type of claim	Requested materials	Received requested materials[a]	Did not contain most of what they needed to know[b]
Initial disability compensation	57	85	22
Disability and death dependency	42	74[c]	23[c]
Initial dependency and indemnity compensation	56	78[c]	32[c]
Burial	28	94	7[c]
Initial disability pension	46	64	35[c]
Initial death pension	57	83[c]	29[c]
Education	51	86	26
Reopened compensation and pension	45	61	23[c]
All claims	50	74	23

Note: VA officials indicated that specific informational materials address education and vocational rehabilitation claims, but all other claim types are discussed in brochures that cover multiple benefits.

[a]Percentages are of those applicants who requested materials.

[b]Percentages are of those applicants who received materials.

[c]Sampling error exceeds plus or minus 12 percentage points. See figure III.2.

Table III.8: Applicants Who Said VA's Letters Did Not Contain What They Needed to Know (Questions 37 and 40)

Percentages

Type of claim	Received letter[a]	Did not contain most of what they needed to know[b]
Initial disability compensation	92	40
Disability and death dependency	90	28
Initial dependency and indemnity compensation	89	33
Burial	84	17
Initial disability pension	93	30
Initial death pension	93	31
Education	90	16
Reopened compensation and pension	79	44
All claims	84	34

[a]Percentages are of all applicants.

[b]Percentages are of those applicants who received letters.

Table III.9: Applicants Who Called VA but Did Not Get Information They Needed (Questions 43 and 49)

Percentages

Type of claim	Contacted VA by phone[a]	Did not obtain most of what they needed[b]
Initial disability compensation	49	44[c]
Disability and death dependency	61	35
Initial dependency and indemnity compensation	59	39[c]
Burial	27	[d]
Initial disability pension	40	44[c]
Initial death pension	51	34[c]
Education	72	33
Reopened compensation and pension	50	52[c]
All claims	52	41

[a]Percentages are of all applicants.

[b]Percentages are of those applicants who contacted VA by phone.

[c]Sampling error exceeds plus or minus 12 percentage points. See figure III.2.

[d]Too few respondents to allow meaningful analysis.

Table III.10: Applicants Who Visited VA but Did Not Get Information They Needed (Questions 51 and 56)

Percentages

Type of claim	Visited VA regional office[a]	Did not obtain most of what they needed[b]
Initial disability compensation	33	36[c]
Disability and death dependency	37	49[c]
Initial dependency and indemnity compensation	40	37[c]
Burial	11	0
Initial disability pension	39	38[c]
Initial death pension	31	[d]
Education	23	18[c]
Reopened compensation and pension	44	54[c]
All claims	37	40

[a]Percentages are of all applicants.

[b]Percentages are of those applicants who visited VA offices.

[c]Sampling error exceeds plus or minus 12 percentage points. See figure III.2.

[d]Too few respondents to allow meaningful analysis.

Table III.11: Applicants Who Had to Resubmit Civilian Records (Questions 33 and 35)

Percentages

Type of claim	Submitted records[a]	Resubmitted records[b]
Initial disability compensation	44	22
Disability and death dependency	59	39[c]
Initial dependency and indemnity compensation	82	27
Burial	48[c]	[d]
Initial disability pension	74	21
Initial death pension	80	35[c]
Education	34	35[c]
Reopened compensation and pension	46	38
All claims	49	33

[a]Percentages are of all applicants. Some applicants did not need civilian records to support their claims.

[b]Percentages are of those applicants who submitted civilian records to VA.

[c]Sampling error exceeds plus or minus 12 percentage points. See figure III.2.

[d]Too few respondents to allow meaningful analysis.

Table III.12: Claims Fully Allowed, Partially Allowed, and Denied (Question 5)

Percentages

Type of claim	Fully allowed	Partially allowed	Denied
Initial disability compensation	19	37	44
Disability and death dependency	55	23	22
Initial dependency and indemnity compensation	38	11	51
Burial	78	9	13
Initial disability pension	37	15	49
Initial death pension	44[a]	16	40[a]
Education	77	14	9
Reopened compensation and pension	34	19	47
All claims	44	20	36

Notes: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Excludes 20 percent of all applicants whose claims were not finalized.

[a]Sampling error exceeds plus or minus 12 percentage points. See figure III.2.

Table III.13: How Applicants First Learned About VA Benefits (Question 6)

Percentages

Type of claim	VA or military[a]	State/ county veterans office	Friend or relative	Veterans organization	Someone else	Other[b]	Don't recall
Initial disability compensation	61	9	10	13	3	2	1
Disability and death dependency	40	9	11	23	8	1	7
Initial dependency and indemnity compensation	29	11	13	18	25	1	3
Burial	34[c]	12	4	4	8	36	2
Initial disability pension	27	13	20	17	20	1	2
Initial death pension	20	14	25	19	11	12	0
Education	84	3	7	1	3	2	1
Reopened compensation and pension	29	16	9	25	13	2	6
All claims	45	11	10	17	9	4	4

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

[a]Includes VA literature, VA employees, and military.

[b]Includes radio or television advertisements, funeral home or cemetery staff, or school officials.

[c]Sampling error exceeds plus or minus 12 percentage points. See figure III.2.

Table III.14: Sources That Helped Applicants Most in Filing Their Claims (Question 9)

Percentages

Type of claim	VA	State/ county veterans office	Friend or relative	Veterans organization	Other[a]	No one was helpful
Initial disability compensation	31	36	3	22	2	7
Disability and death dependency	19	31	7	28	7	9
Initial dependency and indemnity compensation	18	28	15	28	3	9
Burial	21[b]	21[b]	5	5	41[b]	7
Initial disability pension	32	41	7	14	2	5
Initial death pension	21	33	19	12	7	7
Education	18	9	6	3	60	5
Reopened compensation and pension	20	38	4	25	4	10
All claims	24	30	5	20	14	8

Notes: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Although, as shown on table III.13, VA or the military are cited as the single most frequent first sources of benefits information, applicants most often cited one of three key sources as most helpful: VA, state or county offices, and veterans service organizations. Notable exceptions include applicants for burial benefits, who often cited funeral home or cemetery officials as the most helpful, and applicants for education benefits, who often cited school officials.

[a]Includes radio or television advertisements, funeral home or cemetery staff, or school officials.

[b]Sampling error exceeds plus or minus 12 percentage points. See figure III.2.

Figure III.1: What Applicants Would Most Like VA to Improve

Percentages	Initial Disability Compensation	Disability and Death Dependency	Initial Dependency and Indemnity Compensation	Burial	Initial Disability Pension	Initial Death Pension	Education	Reopened Compensation and Pension	All Claims
Provide service in a more reasonable amount of time[a]	52	56	38	40	49	46	51	52	50
Have my records available when they are needed	26	11	13	10	19	10	11	13	15
Have employees who treat me with courtesy and respect	7	11	6	12	9	5	12	13	11
Have employees with the knowledge to answer my questions[b]	17	20	22	21	19	15	30	19	19
Have employees who are interested in helping me	13	12	15	12	25	21	15	31	20
Have forms and letters that are easy to understand	16	27	21	14	21	23	18	17	17
Keep me informed on the status of my application[b]	36	31	31	31	31	38	18	34	30
Ask me for all the information needed to support my claim all at one time[b]	11	19	7	21	13	15	13	10	13
Make it easier to reach VA by phone	5	12	10	10	10	8	20	10	12
Make it easier to reach VA in person	3	1	0	2	8	5	5	6	5
Keep accurate records	8	6	7	10	4	2	9	9	8
Require less paperwork from me	5	18	16	14	10	23	12	9	12
Explain the services and benefits available to me	21	25	32	17	19	31	20	22	23
Explain the reasons for decisions	37	17	22	17	16	20	20	24	24
Other	9	5	10	7	5	3	13	7	8

Note: Shaded areas are the top three service issues that applicants want VA to improve.

[a]Sampling errors for burial and initial death pension claims exceed plus or minus 12 percentage points. See figure III.2.

[b]Sampling error for burial claims exceeds plus or minus 12 percentage points. See figure III.2.

Figure III.2: Maximum Sampling Errors by Type of Claim

Percentages	Initial Disability Compensation	Disability and Death Dependency	Initial Dependency and Indemnity Compensation	Burial	Initial Disability Pension	Initial Death Pension	Education	Reopened Compensation and Pension
Table III.1	9	10	11	13	9	12	9	8
Table III.2	9	10	11	11	9	12	8	8
Table III.3	9	10	11	11	9	11	8	8
Table III.5	9	10	11	13	9	12	9	8
Table III.6	8	10	11	14	9	11	9	9
Table III.7	10	15	16	13	15	16	12	13
Table III.8	9	9	11	11	8	12	7	9
Table III.9	13	12	15	12	14	16	10	13
Table III.10	14	16	17	8	13	11	14	13
Table III.11	11	13	12	11	9	13	15	12
Table III.12	9	10	12	11	10	13	8	9
Table III.13	8	10	10	13	8	10	7	8
Table III.14	9	10	11	15	9	12	9	9
Figure III.1	9	11	12	15	9	13	9	9

Comments From the Secretary of Veterans Affairs

THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON

AUG 3 1994

Mr. David P. Baine
Director, Federal Health Care
Delivery Issues
U. S. General Accounting Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Baine:

I have received your draft report, **VETERANS' BENEFITS: Poor Timeliness and Communication Key to Customer Dissatisfaction** (GAO/HEHS-94-179). I agree with GAO's overall conclusion that improved timeliness and communication will improve customer satisfaction. I concur with the recommendations, and am enclosing comments to demonstrate the Under Secretary for Benefits' commitment to implementing them.

In addition, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) is developing a Customer Service Plan that will reflect basic customer requirements such as being treated with courtesy and respect, as well as key areas for improvement indicated by customer survey and focus group results. The Department will forward VBA's Customer Service Plan to the Vice President's National Performance Review by September 8, 1994.

Now on pp. 8-10.

As far as GAO's report is concerned, however, I believe the data presented are subject to misinterpretation. The survey's vulnerability can be seen in the report's statistic that "over one-third of VA's customers did not get most of the information they wanted from VA" (pages 8 and 9). In reality, only the question regarding visits to the office asked the person surveyed to be certain their answer was about the Federal VA, not State or other service providers. Experience with our customers indicates that many do not know when they are contacting the Federal VA as opposed to State or county service officers. During the preliminary briefing on this survey, GAO acknowledged that the failure to provide information to a customer may not have been the Federal VA's, but one of the other sources customers contacted. Regrettably, the survey instrument did not allow for this variable.

I emphasize that the report's conclusions can be applied only to the sampled group, i.e., customers who filed claims for benefits. Veterans benefits counselors completed more than 12

2.

Mr. David P. Baine

million contacts in Fiscal Year 1993, the majority of which did not result in a claim being filed. Results of this GAO survey, therefore, should be used carefully when evaluating customer satisfaction within the Veterans Assistance Service's programs.

Now on p. 26.

Finally, the data presented in "Table I: Universe of potential claims, sample size, and questionnaires received by strata" (Appendix I, page 4) are for the period April 1, 1993, through July 13, 1993. Unfortunately, the GAO sample did not identify those claims opened after April 1 and completed before July 13. These customers, likely to be among our most satisfied, were completely overlooked by the sampling technique.

The enclosure details the actions the Veterans Benefits Administration is taking to implement the report's recommendations. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on your report.

Sincerely yours,

Jesse Brown

Jesse Brown

Enclosure
JB/vz

Enclosure

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMENTS TO GAO DRAFT REPORT, VETERANS' BENEFITS: Poor Timeliness and Communication Key to Customer Dissatisfaction (GAO/HEHS-94-179)

GAO recommends that I direct the Under Secretary for Benefits to:

-- **set long-term goals to meet customer expectations for processing times, and prepare a plan describing the incremental steps necessary to meet them,**

Concur We agree our efforts should be directed toward satisfying our customers by meeting their expectations. The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) established timeliness goals with incremental steps necessary to accomplish those goals. VBA believes these goals are reasonable based on expectations. VBA also recognizes customer concerns must be considered in establishing timeliness goals. Accordingly, VBA anticipates conducting focus groups and surveys of users of veterans benefits to obtain customer input in preparing claims processing timeliness goals. After they have gathered sufficient data to define customer expectations accurately, VBA can establish customer-based goals and a plan to meet them.

-- **provide applicants realistic estimates about how long it will take to complete their claims, and**

Concur In the short run, VBA is considering the feasibility of providing an "expectation" letter to claimants based on the type of claim filed and a specified normal processing time. For example, a letter might not be sent for a claim that would normally take less than 45 days. In the long run, it is VBA's desire to include in the design of the claims processing system and in the modernized system the ability to provide claimants with specific claim feedback as VBA develops their claims. For example, VBA wants the ability to advise a claimant automatically when the regional office receives a piece of evidence and further advise the claimant of what evidence remains outstanding.

-- **develop data on denied applicants so VA can ensure that segment of its customers gets the best service possible.**

Concur We fully agree that applicants whose claims are denied, as well as those whose claims are partially or fully allowed, should be included in all VBA customer surveys relating to benefits processing. Our Customer Based Measures Survey conducted in November 1992 included applicants whose claims had been denied. We

1

also believe it useful to determine satisfaction with the claims process up to a final decision in order to eliminate a possible "halo" effect of the final resolution of the claim (either positive or negative). In this way, VBA can determine those areas that can be improved regardless of the outcome of the claim.

2

Major Contributors to This Report

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