



IBM Center for  
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Boundaries Series

# Collaboration Between Government and Outreach Organizations

A Case Study of the Department of Veterans Affairs



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## Foreword

On behalf of the IBM Center for The Business of Government, we are pleased to present this report, *Collaboration between Government and Outreach Organizations: A Case Study of the Department of Veterans Affairs*, by Lael Keiser, University of Missouri, and Susan Miller, University of South Carolina.

This report addresses an important topic that does not always receive significant attention: the role of outreach organizations in assisting government agencies to determine benefit eligibility of citizens applying for services. Outreach organizations are defined as state and local governments, nonprofit, and other organizations that directly assist federal agencies by acting as intermediaries for eligible citizens in applying for federal programs that may be complex and hard to understand. Unlike third-party assistance, in which nonprofit or for-profit organizations actually deliver a service, outreach organizations work to inform citizens on available benefits and assist them in filing (and appealing if necessary) claims for those benefits.

There are numerous examples of outreach organizations working closely with federal agencies to ensure eligible participants receive services. Many help low-income applicants apply for the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (also known as SNAP, or food stamps), Social Security, and Medicaid programs.

This report examines a large government program with a long history of complex interaction with outreach organizations. The authors examine the role of state veterans agencies and veterans service organizations, such as the American Legion and the Disabled American Veterans, in working with the Veterans Disability Compensation program of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The authors examine dynamics that lead to effective collaboration between these outreach organizations and the government program, on behalf of its beneficiaries.

Professors Keiser and Miller conclude that there is indeed effective collaboration between these veterans outreach organizations and the VA. In fact, these organizations serve a key role as intermediaries between the Veterans Benefits Administration and veterans who apply for disability compensation. They help veterans understand the potential benefits available to them,



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assist them in filing claims, and help lighten the load of VA benefit examiners by ensuring applicant paperwork is in order in advance. They also serve as communications conduits during the determination process.

Nevertheless, there continues to be room for improved program performance from the relationship between outreach organizations and VA, and Professors Keiser and Miller provide five strategies that can further enhance the benefits of that relationship between federal agencies and outreach organizations.

This report continues the IBM Center's long interest in improving collaboration between government and outside organizations, as well as in new approaches to the delivery of services. A recent report, *Beyond Citizen Engagement: Involving the Public in Co-Delivering Government Services*, by P.K. Kannan and Ai-Mei Chang, examines alternative service delivery mechanisms in which citizens are actively engaged in the delivery of services. The role of outreach organizations and their relationship to federal agencies merit further examination as a vehicle for improving the delivery of services to citizens, especially in a period of long-term fiscal austerity.

We hope that this report will be enlightening and helpful to public-sector managers at all levels of government as they seek to find new strategies to improve the delivery of services to citizens, especially through effective collaboration with outreach organizations.



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# Introduction

The U.S. federal government provides assistance to eligible populations through a variety of targeted programs, including:

- Temporary Aid to Needy Families
- Medicaid
- Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP)
- Earned Income Tax Credit
- Old Age Security and Disability Insurance (Social Security)
- Supplemental Security Income
- Veterans Disability Compensation (VDC)

These targeted public programs have specific eligibility criteria and complex application processes that are costly to administer (Kincheloe, Frates, and Brown 2006; Kleven and Kopczuk 2005). Nonprofit organizations and state and local governments engage in outreach activities designed to address this complexity. These activities may include identifying potential claimants, providing information, and assisting in the application process (Aizer 2003; Kincheloe, Frates, and Brown 2006).

By performing these outreach activities, state and local governments, nonprofits, and other organizations, referred to here as outreach organizations, have the potential to impact the performance of government agencies implementing programs. Research demonstrates that outreach activities increase the number of potential eligible claimants who apply for government assistance (Aizer 2003; Kincheloe, Frates, and Brown 2006; Weil and Holahan 2002). Additionally, outreach organizations can help ensure that applications are filled out correctly and completely, which can allow government agencies to process claims more quickly and with greater accuracy. These outreach organizations can also assist government agencies with customer service requests by fielding questions about a program and alerting government agencies to problems that clients are experiencing. Given these potential benefits, government agencies have an opportunity to engage outreach organizations in collaborative efforts that improve government performance.

The challenges that government agencies are currently facing in timely and accurate claims processing underscore the importance of building effective partnerships between government agencies and outreach organizations. The recent economic downturn significantly increased demand for government programs, and agencies are having difficulty keeping up with this

## List of Acronyms

**VDC:** Veterans Disability Compensation

**VA:** Department of Veterans Affairs

**VSO:** Veterans Service Organization

**SVA:** State Veterans Agency

**VBA:** Veterans Benefits Administration,  
Department of Veterans Affairs

**VO:** Veterans Organizations (including  
both VSOs and SVAs)

demand. Waiting times in several programs, such as veterans disability compensation and Social Security disability, are so high that many have labeled it a crisis (Leopold 2009). News stories about the backlogs abound (Rose 2011; Zoroya 2011; Dao 2009; 2012; 2013). Claimants who need cash assistance to meet their daily needs are harmed by long waiting times. Furthermore, agencies must also serve their clients and protect taxpayers by ensuring accuracy in eligibility determination, which is difficult to do under pressures to process cases very quickly. Long waiting times and inconsistent eligibility decisions have plagued many targeted programs in the federal government (Rose 2011; Zoroya 2011).

Effective collaboration between government agencies and outreach organizations can potentially:

- **Reduce the time** that it takes to process applications
- **Increase accuracy** in eligibility decisions
- **Improve** customer service

Specifically, employees of outreach organizations can assist government agencies in several ways:

- **By developing expertise about what records and legal documents are necessary to process claims quickly and accurately, then assisting claimants in providing these items in the appropriate form to government agencies.** Outreach organizations can remove some of the burden on public employees in collecting essential information from claimants. This could potentially speed up the application process and improve accuracy.
- **By providing potential claimants with more accurate information on whether (or how well) they meet the eligibility criteria, thereby reducing unnecessary claims and decreasing the workload of government employees.** Because of their experience with the program's application process, employees of outreach organizations can alert government agencies to systemic or individual problems in the eligibility determination process. Ultimately, this could help to improve government performance.
- **By increasing trust, because employees from outreach organizations can be seen as honest brokers.** This makes outreach organization personnel well-positioned to explain the claims process to claimants and help them understand the various issues they might face as their claim works through the process. Furthermore, outreach organization personnel can alert government agencies to problems of customer service because outreach staff interact so frequently with claimants.

However, effective collaboration that actually improves government performance is not easy to achieve for a number of reasons. As Russell Mills points out in his 2010 IBM Center report, *Voluntary Regulatory Partnership Programs with Industry: Lessons from the Federal Aviation Administration*, collaboration can be problematic when the goals of outreach organizations are not aligned with those of the government. This is a concern about collaboration in many different program areas, including eligibility-based programs. One primary goal of outreach organizations is increasing access to government programs. These outreach organizations often play advocacy roles similar to those played by interest groups (Keiser and Miller 2010).

This objective of increasing access to government programs may lead employees of outreach organizations to advocate for an overly lenient interpretation of eligibility rules. This is in conflict with the government employees' responsibility to accurately apply the eligibility criteria in a given program, and may make collaboration uncomfortable and ineffective. If conflicting objectives exist, then government employees may have a hard time trusting the motivations of outreach organization employees, which can also limit the effectiveness of collaboration (Bardach 1998).

Additionally, collaboration might decrease the performance of government agencies if it takes time and energy away from agency core organizational tasks and goals (Bardach 1998; Wilson 1984). In eligibility-based programs, encouraging interaction between government employees and outreach personnel may distract government employees from working through their caseload and/or increase the difficulty of interpreting eligibility rules. Consequently, it is possible that collaboration may have a negative impact on the agency and its effective implementation of a program.

Collaboration must be managed carefully. To succeed, government managers must:

- **Overcome the obstacles associated with collaboration.** Often government employees are reluctant to collaborate because they might view outreach collaborators as having disparate goals or they might not think that the collaborators have much to offer. Managers must deal with this resistance and help employees overcome their hesitancy.
- **Ensure that the agency does not fall into the potential pitfalls associated with collaboration.** For example, in eligibility determination, managers must be careful not to let collaboration lead to a loss of productivity and reduced accuracy.

Using findings from an analysis of the collaboration between the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), veterans service organizations (VSOs), and state veterans agencies (SVAs) in the implementation of the Veterans Disability Compensation (VDC) program, this report addresses two questions.

- What benefits and costs are associated with collaboration in eligibility-based programs?
- What strategies can government managers and outreach organizations adopt to promote collaboration between agency employees and outreach organizations, while also avoiding the potential pitfalls associated with collaborative relationships?

The research methodology for the study is presented in Appendix I.

The collaboration between VA, VSOs, and SVAs has a long history. This collaborative relationship therefore provides a good case to explore both the potential for and the challenges of collaboration for government agencies tasked with determining citizen eligibility for government programs.

# Background

## Understanding Veterans Benefits

Disability compensation is a monthly payment made to veterans with a physical or mental disability incurred in or aggravated by military service. The VA attempts to compensate veterans for loss of earning due to service-connected injuries (VA Inspector General's Report 2005).

Under the current Veterans Disability Compensation (VDC) program, eligibility requires that a veteran was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable and that the veteran's disease or injury was incurred or aggravated in the line of duty. Eligibility is not linked to income or employment status. Compensation payments are based on a disability-rating schedule that rates disability in 10-percent increments from zero to 100 percent, with the amount of compensation increasing as the veteran's level of disability increases. In 2011, over 3.3 million veterans received disability compensation, which is 15 percent of the total U.S. veteran population, and the average annual disability compensation payment was \$11,737. About 9.6 percent of all veterans receiving benefits have a 100-percent disability rating as of 2011 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011). However, 23.6 percent of new beneficiaries in 2011 were in the 100 percent disability rating category.

VDC is administered in a decentralized fashion in the U.S. through 56 VA regional offices that exist in each state, one per state with four exceptions (California has three offices and New York, Pennsylvania, and Texas each have two). Regional offices are state-level, not regional in the traditional sense. The VDC claims for a particular state are processed at the regional VA office(s) by federal employees, who develop, investigate, and authorize claims filed by veterans.

The eligibility determination process generally includes three, and sometimes four, major steps:

- **First, a veteran files a claim.** More than a majority of veterans, 64.7% in 2005 (Hunter et al. 2006), file VDC applications with the help of a representative, who is often from a VSO or a state government agency.
- **Second, after the application is filed, the claim starts moving through the rating process.** During this step, the veteran may be asked to get a physical examination to obtain necessary evidence.
- **Third, the rating decision is made and the veteran is notified.** If a veteran is satisfied, then this concludes the process for that particular claim.
- **Fourth, if a veteran is unsatisfied with the rating decision, then a veteran can appeal the decision in a separate appeals process.**

The VA has a legal obligation to help veterans gather evidence for their claims. In November 2000, Congress passed the Veterans Claims Assistance Act of 2000 (Public Law 106-475), which codified the VA's duty to assist the claimant. The VA is required to assist the claimant to develop all evidence that is relevant to his/her claim and keep the claimant informed about

the claim. The requirements of the VA's "duty to assist" are laid out in the Federal Code (38 USC 5103 and 38 CFR § 3.159). Generally, the VA must assist a claimant in obtaining all relevant records for the claim, provide medical examinations, and obtain medical opinions, if relevant for the compensation claim.

## Challenges Facing the Veterans Disability Compensation Program

The Leadership Covenant of the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), the agency within the VA that manages the VDC program, states: "Our commitment to Accountability, Integrity, and Professionalism will establish consistency and enhance fairness, timeliness, uniformity, and quality for every deserving veteran and employee. It will guide process and decision-making at all levels and enable open lines of communication between us" (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012).

While working to achieve these ambitions, however, the VA has struggled throughout its history to handle claims in both an efficient and effective manner. In 1999, to address growing concerns over the accuracy of VDC decisions, the Veterans Millennium Health Care and Benefits Act established a rigorous quality assurance program within VA. This act required the VA to systematically check disability decisions for errors and report annually on the accuracy of its decisions.

In the last few years, however, while still under pressure to improve quality, the VA also experienced a renewed focus on claims processing speed. In the fall of 2012, 890,000 claims were pending for disability compensation and pensions, which the *New York Times* describes as a "crushing inventory of claims" (Dao 2012). Since September 2009, the number of claims that have been in the system for more than 125 days has more than tripled (Stewart/Shumaker

### Understanding Veterans Organizations (VOs)

Veterans service organizations and state veterans agencies play an integral role in the implementation of the Veterans Disability Compensation (VDC) program. In addition to advising on national veterans policy, these organizations also represent veterans in claiming disability compensation benefits. The representatives from these organizations function as attorneys-in-fact, assisting veterans who are claiming VDC benefits free of charge. The VA refers to these organizations as "partners" on its website. Veterans organizations must be accredited in order to represent a veteran on a claim.

**Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs)** are non-governmental veterans organizations, such as Disabled American Veterans, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the American Legion, that are recognized by the VA to assist veterans with disability compensation claims. There are 40 VSOs that are recognized by the VA to serve in this capacity. Some VSOs have accredited service officers in all VA regional offices across the U.S., while others are regional in nature.

**State Veterans Agencies (SVAs)** are state government agencies that are recognized by the VA to present VDC claims. Almost all states maintain veterans agencies that are recognized by the VA for this function. The SVAs serve veterans residing in their particular state. SVAs and VSOs often share veterans service officers. These multi-affiliated service officers represent claimants under the auspices of the different organizations with which they are affiliated.

Given that VSOs and SVAs serve almost identical roles in terms of assisting veterans in claiming VDC benefits, we refer to both organizations collectively as Veterans Organizations (VOs) throughout this report.

2013). Moreover, while the average wait time for all veterans is 273 days, the average wait time for veterans filing their first claim is between 316 and 327 days (Glantz 2013).

In response to this backlog, the VA has successfully increased the number of claims that it processes. Since 2010, the VA has processed over a million claims a year compared with 750,000 in 2005 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012). In June 2013, VA announced the number of pending claims had been reduced to 852,229, with 565,327 (or 66.4 percent) waiting 125 days or more for resolution. VA reported that the shift from a paper-based system to the automated Veterans Benefits Management System is helping speed up claims processing. The VA goal is to process all claims within 125 days with 98 percent accuracy in 2015 (Brewin 2013).

This increase in processing is not, however, enough to keep pace with the increase in the number of veterans filing new claims or appealing rating decisions in a separate process. In 2012, veterans filed more than 1.3 million claims, which was double the number filed in 2001 (Dao 2012). The increase in the number of claims is explained not only by the increase in the number of soldiers with disabling conditions from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also because the government has increased the number of diseases that have “presumptive connections” with military service. In 2010, for example, ischemic heart disease, Parkinson’s disease, and b-cell leukemia were added to the list of diseases caused by Agent Orange exposure in Vietnam. In the last two years, the VA processed more than 240,000 claims filed for these diseases (Dao 2012). So, while the VA has substantially increased the number of claims it processes, this increase is not enough to keep up with the number of veterans who apply.

In light of this substantial backlog, the VA has faced criticism from Congress, veterans organizations, and clients, and is under intense pressure to reduce the backlog and improve claims-processing speed without reducing quality. Recently the criticism and political backlash have reached new heights with members of Congress asking for the resignation of the VA under secretary for benefits (Dao 2013). As one response to these pressures, the VA has increasingly emphasized claims processing speed through the use of productivity standards. In addition, VBA is undergoing an organizational transformation which includes people, process, and technology initiatives. VBA believes this transformation will dramatically improve the claims process and ultimately eliminate the backlog.

Trade-offs exist, however, between increasing case processing speed and the quality of decisions. Concerns exist that productivity may take priority over quality assurance (American Legion Congressional Statement 2009; Dao 2012). The VA is thus between the proverbial rock and hard place, with multiple principals making conflicting demands. Congress and other government officials are placing immense pressure on the VA to reduce backlog and improve processing speed, while it faces criticism from veterans organizations, such as the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, about the diminished quality of claim processing. In 2009, Ian de Planque, the assistant director of the American Legion’s Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Commission, stated, “Despite the fact that VBA’s policy of ‘production first’ has resulted in many more veterans getting faster action on their claims, the downside has been that tens of thousands of cases are prematurely and arbitrarily denied” (American Legion Congressional Statement 2009).

In sum, like many public agencies tasked with processing applications for benefits, the VA must find a way to more quickly process large backlogs while at the same time maintaining the quality of decisions. VA managers and employees face enormous pressures from external stakeholders and high levels of workplace stress. This makes collaboration with outreach organizations especially important, but also especially challenging.

## Role of Veterans Organizations

This report is based on extensive interviews with staff members in the regional offices of the Department of Veterans Affairs and staff from two key sets of outreach organizations: veterans service organizations (VSOs) and state veterans agencies (SVAs). Throughout this report, we will refer to both VSOs and SVAs as veterans organizations (VOs).

Both VSOs and SVAs are discussed in the box, *Understanding Veterans Organizations*, on page 10. Additional background information on the history of the veterans service organizations and how they came to play an integral role in the implementation of VDC is presented in Appendix II. The three largest VSOs are Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), the American Legion, and Disabled American Veterans (DAV).

In addition to influencing policy at the national level by advocating to Congress and alerting the VA to concerns about program implementation, the VOs are direct participants in the implementation process. VOs can help improve claims processing by educating veterans about the process, by alerting the VA to implementation problems, and by directly participating in the claims process.

For example, Richard Dumancas, American Legion deputy director for claims, Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Division, and the former director of the County Veterans Service Office in Minnesota, organized town hall meetings in Minnesota to inform veterans of the VDC claims process. He invited the Minnesota VA regional office director and upper-level regional office managers to speak at these events so that they could personally educate the veterans on what is needed to file a benefits claim. During these meetings, the regional office director could hear veterans' issues regarding their claims. These meetings not only served to educate the veterans, but also helped VA managers identify problematic trends in the claiming process.

The role that the VOs play in the claiming process is codified into law. The United States Code (38 USC § 5902) outlines the VOs' function as power of attorney for claimants and states the VA's responsibility to them in this capacity. Additionally, the regulations created by VA in its internal manuals expand on the direct role of the VOs in the implementation of the Veterans Disability Compensation program. In part because of their formalized role in the process, the VOs interact on a regular basis with managers and employees in the regional office during the entire processing of claims. The specific tasks performed by the VOs are listed in the box, *VO Activities in Assisting Veterans*. Many of these activities require coordination with the regional office.

## **VO Activities in Assisting Veterans**

### **Outreach Activities Informing Veterans on Available Benefits**

- Organize outreach events to increase awareness of Veterans Disability Compensation benefits
- Meet with veterans at the time of, or before, their discharge to notify them of the available benefits

### **Claims Assistance: Representing Veterans in Claims Process**

- Meet with veterans and help them decide the conditions for which to seek compensation.
- Provide advice to veterans who want to manage their own claims.
- File claims for veterans, which includes completing the required VA forms on behalf of claimants.
- Explain the process to veterans.
- Explain the regulations that are applicable to veterans.
- Respond to questions from veterans about letters they receive from the VA.
- Track claims.
- Identify medical information veterans need and assist them in getting that information.
- Contact the VA Regional Office on behalf of veterans.
- Review decisions by VA.
- Advise veterans about whether to appeal and explain the appeals process.
- File Notice of Disagreement if a veteran thinks the decision on his/her claim is incorrect.
- Review denied claims and assist veterans in preparing responses.
- Assist veterans in preparing appeals.
- Represent veterans in appeals.
- Assist veterans in reopening VDC claims.

# Findings: Collaboration between the Department of Veterans Affairs and Veterans Organizations

The findings presented below are based on interviews with over 40 individuals with intimate knowledge of the Veterans Disability Compensation (VDC) program and the collaboration between the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), and the State Veterans Agencies (SVAs). Officials (retired and current) from the Department of Veterans Affairs and VSOs were interviewed in both central and local-level offices.

## Finding One: Collaboration is Viewed as Useful By Both the VA and the VOs

In the Veterans Disability Compensation program, the VA and the VOs have many opportunities to work together. The VA officially recognizes its collaboration with VSOs and SVAs on its website by listing links to VSOs under the banner of Partners on the page, *About the VA*.<sup>1</sup> VA officials in both headquarters and the regional offices recognize the official designation of the VSOs and SVAs as partners. However, the opportunity to collaborate is meaningless unless the participants view the collaborative effort to be worthwhile, in both theory and practice.

For this report, interviewees from both the VA and VOs were asked whether they regard collaboration with the other group as important to the VDC program and how they would rate the quality of the collaboration that exists in their current regional office. Darryl Brady, the director of the Hartford regional office, states, "I encourage our employees to work with VO staff members to better serve our veterans. We are committed to provide quality and timely service to the men and women who served our country." In fact, with the exception of only one supervisor, all VA and VO employees regard collaboration as important to effective implementation of the VDC program.

Several managers in the regional offices say that it would be impossible for the VA to do its job without the VOs. When asked about the importance of collaboration in relation to other factors that could influence the effectiveness of the VDC program implementation, most respondents, from both the VA and VOs, note that it is important, but not necessarily the most important factor contributing to effective performance. There is a general consensus among those interviewed that there are areas where improving the quality of collaboration would improve performance, and when that is the case, it is worth investing time on it. A senior VA official, for example, notes that he does not seek to improve collaboration for its own sake, but seeks to do so in areas where it will improve performance.

## Finding Two: The Quality of Collaboration is High

Most of those interviewed consider the quality of collaboration to be generally good. Many rate the general collaboration in their regional office as better than in other offices they have

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1. <http://www.va.gov/statedva.htm> (accessed April 10, 2013).

heard about, or better now in comparison with the past. Almost all VA personnel interviewed describe the relationship as good, as do most VOs interviewed, although all also note some areas that need improvement. Many VA and VO employees indicate that their relationship is reciprocal, with employees of each organization helping the other out whenever possible.

VA and VO staff provide numerous examples of how each helps the other out. Several VSO and SVA employees recount incidences when VA employees have gone the extra mile to help resolve a problem with a claim that not only saved the veteran time, it also saved the VA employee time. As one regional office supervisor notes, “They [the VOs] come and ask me questions, I go and ask them questions—it kind of evens out. We just help each other.” All of the managers in VSOs and SVAs describe the collaboration in positive terms.

### **Finding Three: Communication is Generally Good Between VA and the VOs**

Communication is an essential part of collaboration; overall most people interviewed think communication between the regional offices, VSOs, and SVAs is good. Most VOs indicate, and regional office managers confirm, that the regional office directors and supervisors all have open-door policies toward the VOs. All VO staff members interviewed say that if they have a problem with a claim, it is quite easy for them to communicate with a manager in the regional office about that problem and almost all the VO personnel believe that the regional office managers are willing to address their concern if possible.

### **Finding Four: Collaboration Varies Between Regional Offices and VOs**

Although everyone interviewed speaks highly of the quality of collaboration between the VA and the VOs, many indicate that it varies across different regional offices, and across time and employees within the same regional offices. Although some VA personnel say they personally have good lines of communication, they note that they have personally heard some VO employees complaining how the VA supervisors are not as receptive or generous with their time as they could be. Some VO employees believe they are out of the loop on VA policies that will affect them. This is particularly true in offices where regular meetings are not being held. Some VO respondents also say that they would have been able to respond to veterans’ complaints in a more effective manner if the VA personnel had let them know about specific problems that were delaying particular types of cases.

Several of the interviewees with experience in different parts of the country note that differences exist in the quality of collaboration. A former VA senior official states, “It really depends on the office because some regional offices allow for a lot of exchange whereas other regional offices don’t want to advocate for that. It really varies.”

According to officials from VOs with knowledge across many different regional offices, regional offices differ by how much interaction they allow between VA employees and VOs. Some have policies that VA personnel cannot talk to VOs and must only discuss things in writing, while others allows VOs to only talk to managers, while others have complete open-door policies. Some regional office directors actively seek out feedback from VOs in hiring and promotions, while others do not.

VA personnel also note that their relationships with VO staff vary. A regional office supervisor notes, “Theoretically it [collaboration between the VA and VOs] is extremely important. In practical terms it might be tough to get the kind of collaboration we really need in some instances.

Not sure every veteran service officer really, truly understands what we do and why we do it. Some will submit things that are counterproductive to what we are doing. We are not always on the same page. Collaboration is good to the extent that we are on the same page.”

## Finding Five: VA and VO Staffs Have Varying Interpretations of Their Partnership

Individuals within the VOs and the VA have mixed attitudes on whether they view each other as “partners.” They speak of knowing people who view the relationship in more adversarial terms. Several supervisors in one of the regional offices comment, for example, that relationships between the regional office and VO staffs have improved over time. One regional office supervisor states: “Over time, our interactions have improved. When I first started, the relationship was more adversarial. We have now fostered relationships so that VOs have better understanding that we are all here for the veteran.”

Another regional office supervisor explains that while he would describe the relationship as a partnership, he is “[n]ot sure everyone feels that way; some people view them as nuisance.” Some VO employees think that a minority of regional office employees “see us as a hindrance.” Thus, while most interviewees suggest that the relationship is generally good, there is some room for improvement.

In sum, while overall assessment of the quality of collaboration is positive, differences in the quality of collaboration vary across regional offices and across people and time in the same regional office. Identifying how collaboration can improve government performance in the implementation of the VDC and identifying strategies for maximizing the potential while minimizing the pitfalls are, therefore, important.

## Recommendations to Encourage Collaboration Between Government Agencies and Outreach Organizations

The collaboration between the VA and the VSOs/SVAs provides a model of how outreach organizations can work with government agencies to improve claims processing. VSOs/SVAs serve as intermediaries between government agencies and clients. By doing so, they have the potential to improve customer service by making veterans more informed about the benefits available to them, improve timeliness by helping gather and develop the evidence needed to process claims, and improve accuracy by identifying and communicating possible problems in claims processing.

The government collaborates with non-governmental organizations to increase enrollment in government programs in a large number of programs. Currently, the federal government supports outreach activities for a variety of government programs through grants and/or partnerships in programs such as Medicare, Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, Medicaid, Social Security Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services 2012; U.S. Department of Agriculture 2012).

The VDC program is not the only program in which Congress has encouraged this type of close relationship between outreach organizations and government agencies. Congress has helped to create this type of collaborative relationship in other programs. When Congress created SCHIP in the Balanced Budget Act of 1997, for example, it required that state governments develop outreach plans. One way in which

state governments have done this is to provide grants and contracts to outreach organizations to provide application assistance to potential clients of SCHIP, which in turn has increased enrollment, especially among hard to reach populations (Aizer 1993).

The case of VDC provides some specific steps that policymakers can take to reduce existing barriers to collaborative relationships between government agencies and outreach organizations.

- **Create a codified role.** Giving outreach organizations a codified role in the process ensures that government employees receive feedback on their performance on claims processing on a regular basis and increases the likelihood that governmental and non-governmental employees will communicate in ways that help outreach organizations do a better job advising claimants and helping claimants gather evidence and file for benefits. Then government agencies may have better quality applications to process that are faster to promulgate and easier to process accurately. Reforms such as the fully developed claims initiative provide even more opportunity for government agencies to take advantage of collaboration with outreach organizations.
- **Provide access to claimant information.** The interviews revealed that giving outreach organizations access to claimant information has the potential to improve claims processing. Outreach organizations can explain to claimants the status of their applications and inform them of missing documents. Outreach organizations can also help to educate potential claimants about what evidence they need to meet eligibility criteria, which can reduce the number of non-eligible claims filed. This education of claimants frees up time for government workers to focus on assessing evidence and determining eligibility. Without VSOs/SVAs, the VA would have to spend more time than they currently do explaining things to veterans and collecting evidence.
- **Provide physical space.** All of the VA and VOs interviewed believe that providing physical space in government agency buildings enhances the amount and quality of collaboration. Although in practice the VA cannot always achieve this, the interviews revealed that physical propinquity makes it more convenient for government workers to take advantage of outreach organizations to help speed up decisions and makes it more convenient for outreach organizations to alert agency personnel of problems in claims processing. Furthermore, being located in the same building increases interactions, which can increase levels of trust.
- **Educate potential claimants.** Educating potential claimants about outreach organizations is important. Numerous people interviewed in this study indicated that the earlier in the process outreach organizations were involved, the better they were able help potential claimants file in ways that made it easier for government agencies to process claims more efficiently. The VA, VSOs, and SVAs have programs in place to notify veterans about VSOs and SVAs when they exit military service.

Numerous government programs, such as Unemployment, Social Security, Medicaid and Medicare, have claims processing as their primary task. Our findings provide one avenue that could be used to improve performance in agencies that process claims and determine eligibility. Government agencies or benefactors of outreach organizations could provide funding to outreach organizations so that they can provide application assistance. This provides an efficient way for government to improve claims processing since many outreach organizations' provide services not for financial gain but because it coincides with their missions to assist particular sub-groups in the population.

# Case Study: How Collaboration Affects Performance in the Veterans Disability Compensation Program

The interviews conducted for this report were designed to answer two general questions about collaboration and its effect on government performance:

- What is the impact of VA-VO interaction on the delivery of the VDC program?
- What strategies are available to managers who want to gain the most from a collaborative relationship? (Strategies are presented in the next section.)

The interviews reveal that collaboration between the VOs and the VA affects several different aspects of performance, including timeliness of decisions, accuracy of decisions, and the treatment of claimants. While some concerns about collaboration and the role of VOs exist, the benefits of collaboration are many, and managers and VOs have strategies available to maximize the benefits of collaboration and minimize the costs.

When considering the performance of government agencies involved with claims processing, stakeholders and elected officials are primarily interested in three things:

- **Timeliness:** how quickly claimants receive a decision on their claim
- **Accuracy:** the accuracy of that decision
- **Customer service:** how claimants are treated during the process

The effect of collaboration on each of these three aspects of performance is discussed below.

## Impact of Collaboration on Timeliness in Claims Processing

For timeliness, the interviews reveal that VA-VO collaboration has both potential positive and negative impacts. The potential positive impacts highlight the ways in which collaboration might help the VA attain its goal of quick claims processing. The potential negative impacts suggest ways in which this collaboration can hinder timely claims processing. Interviewees suggested methods of minimizing each of the potential negative impacts.

### Positive Impact One: Assisting in the Handling of VA Workload

The interviews reveal that the VOs can have a positive effect on timeliness through their role in interacting with veterans and helping veterans develop their claims. As part of their normal duties, the VOs provide many of the same services as the VA, such as explaining the process to veterans, helping veterans obtain medical documentation for their files, and making sure that applications are complete.

If the VOs were not involved in the process, the demands on the time of the VA employees would increase significantly. Kent Hoffman, DAV national area supervisor, notes that the DAV in Waco takes over 2,400 phone calls per month from veterans about disability and pension claims. He states, "We're taking that much of a burden off of what would normally go to them

## Overview

### Potential Impact of Collaboration on the Timeliness in Claims Processing

#### Potential Positive Impacts

- Assisting in the Handling of VA Workload
- Successfully Gathering Evidence during Claims Development
- Making Claims Easier to Process by Reducing the Number of Unnecessary Claims
- Effectively Handling Priority Cases
- Reducing the Number of Appeals

#### Potential Negative Impacts

- Filing for Multiple Claims
- Potentially Creating Additional Layers of Review
- Generation of Frivolous Appeals
- Additional Burdens on VA Staff

[the VA].” Government agencies without organizations like VOs working for claimants do not have this productivity advantage. Several VA directors and managers say that it would not be possible to do their jobs without the VOs.

### Positive Impact Two: Successfully Gathering Evidence during Claims Development

A central task of government claims processing agencies is to gather the appropriate evidence to make a decision, and collaboration with outreach organizations can make the government more effective in carrying out this task. This includes asking claimants for information and scheduling exams with health care providers. The interviews revealed several ways in which working with VOs could help with this:

- The VOs often have documents in their files, such as personal physician statements, that the VA does not have.
- Many regional office managers believe that the relationship the VOs have with veterans, as well as the amount of experience they have communicating with veterans, make VO representatives particularly effective in getting documents from veterans.
- VA employees must follow regulations regarding communications with veterans that can sometimes increase processing times. VA regulations require, for example, that when the VA sends a letter to a veteran requesting information, he or she must wait 30 days before taking any action on that claim. A quick phone call to the VO can result in getting the information to the regional office much faster.

One reason that VOs can be successful at gathering evidence is that veterans trust them. Many VO managers say they work hard to build trust with veterans, and many regional office managers believe that veterans have higher levels of trust with their VO and better lines of communication than veterans have with VA personnel. This makes veterans more responsive to VO requests for information. One VA supervisor notes that veterans often screen VA calls because they are from an 800 number; she says that the VOs are often able to contact the veteran directly. Thus, the VOs can often get the necessary information more quickly from the veteran. According to Virginia Richards, assistant director of the Waco regional office, the training and experience of the VOs make them particularly well-suited to communicate directly with veterans; VOs have broad knowledge of all programs available to veterans, whereas regional office employees tend to be more specialized. VOs have considerable experience talking with veterans and are trained in how to communicate effectively.

While almost all regional office managers interviewed think that requesting information from VOs can decrease the time it takes to get documents from veterans, VA managers are quick to point out that this is more important for some types of cases than others. The New York service center manager, Joe Corretjer, explains that for claims that just require a doctor's treating statement, e.g., diabetes, asking the VO for that information is much faster than contacting the veteran directly. For some conditions, however, the VA needs to set up an exam, and in those cases it can be faster to talk directly to the veteran. Sue Malley, the New York regional office director, suggests that for simple facts, such as social security number and date of birth, it is usually better to go to the veteran. For more complicated issues, such as requesting evidence or clarifying a claiming issue, it is often better to go to the VOs. Knowing when it is most helpful to work with the VO and when it is not is important in effectively using collaboration with VOs to speed up claims development.

### **Positive Impact Three: Making Claims Easier to Process by Reducing the Number of Unnecessary Claims**

VOs can also shorten the time it takes for claims development by helping veterans avoid filing claims in ways that will unnecessarily increase the time it takes to process the claim. For some VA managers, claims are becoming unnecessarily complex because of the unintended consequences of the duty-to-assist policy (Veterans Claims Assistance Act of 2000). Because of their duty to comply with all regulations, VA personnel are at a disadvantage in trying to streamline a claim. Sometimes veterans have no desire to claim a particular medical condition, and it is quite clear to anyone with knowledge of the process that the condition cannot be awarded based on the regulations, but VA personnel must review all conditions filed by the veteran.

Because of the kind of relationship the VOs have with veterans and the generally high level of trust the veterans have in their VO representatives, VO personnel are well placed to find out what medical conditions the veteran wants included in the claim. The VO personnel have more flexibility than the VA personnel in this situation to determine exactly what medical conditions the veteran wants to claim and to help the VA streamline claims. This can reduce the number of unnecessary claims the VA has to investigate. This makes one regional office supervisor prefer to ask the VOs to get information from the veteran. In his experience, when the VA calls the veteran directly, the veteran ends up applying for more conditions than originally intended, and working through the VOs can help eliminate this problem. A former senior VA official notes that one of the strengths of the VOs is that they can talk more frankly to veterans. Collaboration with the VOs, therefore, helps the VA reduce backlogs and speed up claims processing.

The VOs have a good understanding of the claims process and the best ways to file claims. One VO supervisor notes that claims can be slowed down if the veteran files a claim based on several disabilities, then decides to file for more conditions at a later date. This means the VA must investigate those additional claims before paying any benefits based on the initial claim. The VOs understand this and will advise the veteran to file for everything at once and/or to wait on a decision on the original claim before filing for more conditions. New York Service Center Manager Joe Corretjer explains that for some conditions, the VA only needs a statement from the veteran's treating physician. If VOs know this, they can make sure this is included in the initial application when it is filed. Filing claims in particular ways or including the necessary pieces of evidence for certain conditions speeds up the process, and helps the VA move through claims faster. This is also accomplished by filing fully developed claims, one of the transformation initiatives, when possible.

By collaborating with VOs, VA employees can ensure that claims are filed in a way that allows them to be processed as quickly as possible. One regional office supervisor explains that it was often faster to ask the VOs to call the veteran and sort out the claim: "A lot of times we

will have the VOs call the veteran to say, 'Hey we could do this or we could do that' and ask him which way he wants to go so we do not have to write him a letter and wait 30 days. And they do that for us a lot." Many VA employees note that this service by the VOs helps speed up the claims process. Related to this, there are instances when a claimant is going to be granted a 100% disability rating, but still has other medical issues to be considered. In these cases, the VOs can contact the veteran and ask if the veteran would like to drop these other medical claims. By asking the VOs to clear up confusion about what the veteran wants to claim, the regional office can be more efficient.

#### **Positive Impact Four: Effectively Handling Priority Cases**

VA employees also explain how the VO employees help with priority cases, such as homeless veterans, veterans with terminal diseases, or claims that have been in process for a long time. For these cases, VO employees may personally request that VA employees review them immediately. This allows the VA to get these cases out as soon as they are rated. A regional office supervisor explains that this helps to speed up the process. Other regional office supervisors note that VO employees will hand carry homeless or other hardship cases directly to supervisors, which saves time because it makes it easier to identify these cases.

#### **Positive Impact Five: Reducing the Number of Appeals**

The VOs can also improve timeliness in the appeals stage. The participation of the VOs is codified into law. According to several regional office supervisors, for most appeals that are eventually reversed, it is because the veteran is able to provide documentation that was not originally in their claim. When VOs work with veterans to provide that documentation earlier in the process, it can remove the need for an appeal in the first place and save all of the manpower that goes into processing an appeal. Appeals are very time-consuming to the VA and to the veteran. If an appeal goes to the Board of Veterans' Appeals, it can add years onto the claim processing time.

Through collaboration, regional office personnel can work with VOs to reduce the number of appeals. In both the New York and Waco regional offices, there are reported instances of VOs formally or informally looking over pending appeals to see whether missing pieces of evidence could easily be gathered, preventing the need for an appeal.

As in claims filing, the VO personnel can help the VA increase the efficiency of the process through their expertise with the VDC program. In appeals, one way the VO personnel can do this is by advising their veterans to choose an informal conference with a regional office, which is not recorded, instead of a formal review hearing, which is recorded. Several VO employees explain that informal conferences allow the VA employees to be more candid in their explanations to veterans about what evidence is needed to grant a particular claim. This allows veterans a better understanding of whether it is worth pursuing their claim further, which helps to reduce unnecessary claims. This also allows veterans a better understanding of the evidence needed, and if they can obtain it, then it might remove the need for an appeal at all. Moreover, in terms of what is required by the VA, several VA employees note that the formal hearings place a greater burden on the VA because of the administrative tasks that accompany a recorded hearing.

#### **Negative Impact One: Filing Questionable Claims**

While most VA managers interviewed believe that the partnership between the VOs and the regional offices improves timeliness, they raise some concerns that the VOs can sometimes slow the process down. One concern is that because outreach organizations place such a high priority on providing the best service to their clients — which VA agrees is a good thing — this

can sometimes lead to the filing of questionable claims that may not be supported by evidence. This ultimately slows down the process and contributes to backlogs in the system.

A major challenge for the VA is the complexity with claims processing that occurs when veterans file for multiple ailments. This issue is brought up frequently in interviews with the VA employees as something that contributes to lack of timeliness. Some VA employees think the VOs are increasing the number of issues included in each claim and/or are not trying to streamline claims as much as they could. It is important to note that even those who believe that VOs are contributing to the increased complexity of claims understand, as all regional office personnel do, that claiming multiple disabilities is often appropriate and none hold VOs responsible for this challenge. VA staff recognize that the VO staff ultimately have to file the claim in the way that the veteran requests. Both regional office and VO personnel interviewed, however, indicate that there is room for improvement in making sure that claims are not made unnecessarily complex.

Several interviewees in the regional offices suggest that the VOs could do a better job at helping veterans file claims in an effective manner. Some VA managers think that VOs are encouraging, or at least not discouraging, veterans from filing claims for multiple issues even though there is little evidence to support the claimed issues, and filing the claim in that manner would slow down the process. One regional office supervisor provides the example of a veteran claiming a mental health condition. The VA supervisor believes that the VO representatives sometimes advise veterans to list every mental illness on the list in the hopes that one will stick. She states, "For us, it complicates the claim when we have to consider each mental condition. Sometimes they are trying to cover everything. If VO representatives advise or encourage veterans to file multiple claims when it is not appropriate to do so, the participation of VOs in the process may contribute to the growth in caseloads." Many VA managers note that they think this is a problem, at least in some cases. Several regional office supervisors explain that VO personnel need to be honest with the veterans, and tell them when a claim clearly falls outside of the regulations.

However, explaining to veterans when a condition does not qualify for compensation requires that the VO personnel have the training necessary to advise veterans effectively on these conditions. Efforts to ensure that the VOs have good training can therefore improve the ability of collaboration to improve government performance. A former senior VA official tells us that he believes some VO employees do not have the level of training that they need to effectively advise veterans and instead just advise them to "throw everything in." He is quick to point out, however, that the VOs that have had high-quality training do not do this.

The interviews with VO managers suggest that they recognize their ability to streamline claims. All of the VO managers state that their offices try to reduce the unnecessary filing of claims. VOs are advocates for all veterans, not just those whom they individually represent. Thus, while they could simply do what an individual veteran wants them to do, they can also take the opportunity to make sure the veteran knows the costs of taking particular actions for themselves and for all the veterans waiting for benefits.

Ensuring that all VO employees see this as an important role can help to get the most out of the collaborative relationship. Several VA employees recognize the efforts of the VOs who already do this. A VA supervisor says, "They [VO personnel] are honest with them [the veterans]. If they see that there is not any way to help them, they tell them. And that's important." Every single VO representative we interviewed stated that they try to ensure that veterans file in ways that do not "gum up" the system or that they file for things that meet the regulations. One VO supervisor, for example, considers whether his VO employees handle veterans' claims in a way that helps the regional office manage its caseload when evaluating them.

Given that backlogs are creating substantial problems for veterans, it behooves the government to seek ways to reduce the number of unnecessary conditions listed on each application in order to help the VA reduce the backlog of cases. The interviews suggested ways in which collaboration between the VOs and the VA could help with timeliness and reducing the backlog. Both VO and VA personnel highlight that the VOs are well-positioned to help veterans file claims in ways that ensure that the veterans will receive the benefits to which they are entitled, as well as to increase the likelihood that their claims are processed in a timely fashion. Expanding or prioritizing these practices may help to ameliorate the situation.

### **Negative Impact Two: Potentially Creating Additional Layers of Review**

Before a claim is promulgated, the VO representative is legally entitled to review and sign off on the claim. This adds a layer of bureaucracy to an already cumbersome process and could affect timeliness. When asked about the impact of collaboration on timeliness, some regional office managers bring up the fact that this process can slow them down a bit. The VOs, like the VA, have large caseloads to manage and are very busy. As such, the regulations requiring VO representatives to sign off on rated claims could create additional problems with timeliness.

With a few exceptions, this does not seem to be a problem in the regional offices we visited. Even the VA managers who note this rule as a concern say that when this has created a problem, the VOs were very responsive when they were made aware that the VA was waiting on them. VA managers note that in these cases, the VO personnel often were not aware that the claims were ready for their signature, again highlighting the shared heavy caseloads of both the VOs and VA. While this has the potential to negatively affect timeliness, our interviews indicate that as long as the VA and VO employees have a good working relationship, the additional layer of review should not be problematic.

### **Negative Impact Three: Generation of Frivolous Appeals**

The participation of outreach organizations in the claims process can also increase backlogs and slow the process down because the existence of an advocate might make it more likely that claimants will appeal decisions. While VA supports veterans right to appeal, there is concern about frivolous appeals. This issue is similar to the questionable claims issue: it is difficult to assess whether an appeal is appropriate because reasonable people might disagree.

All VA and VO personnel interviewed express the view that it is the veteran's right to appeal if the veteran wishes to do so. While our study did not address whether representation by the VOs increases the likelihood of an appeal systematically, few of those interviewed think this is a problem. It is important to note that unlike private attorneys, VOs have no financial stake in the outcome of appeals and several people note that any concerns they have about this issue are bigger concerns for private attorneys.

In general, the interviewees suggest that regional office managers can use the VOs to reduce the number of unnecessary appeals in cases where it is clear that the condition does not fall under the regulations by explaining to the veteran what the regulation requires and what they would need to prove that they meet the regulations. In the New York regional office, VA employees and a VO supervisor work together to identify appealed claims that can be resolved without going through the formal appeals process. Again, though, all VO personnel express the view that if veterans want to continue with an appeal, the VO will do what the veteran wants them to do.

### **Negative Impact Four: Additional Burdens on VA Staff**

Another potential negative impact of collaboration on timeliness is that allowing VO personnel access to VA staff who are processing claims could make it more difficult for VA personnel to work quickly, because this communication takes time away from other claims. As one VA supervisor puts it, “If individuals spend 10 minutes arguing one particular case (with a VO employee), that is 10 minutes that they don’t have to promulgate claims.” Other VA supervisors note that it not only disrupts the VA employee involved in the conversation, it also disrupts all of the other VA employees in the area.

Distraction of frontline employees is particularly problematic for managers because it potentially could affect performance on productivity standards. The VA has performance standards that require employees to complete a certain number of work products on a daily basis. Employees who do not meet these standards are at risk for being terminated or disciplined.

To deal with the potential distraction associated with communicating directly with VO personnel, many VA managers have adopted a “supervisor (or coach) first” policy. Under this policy, VOs are asked to bring any issues to the VA managers first, and then the manager can set up a meeting with the frontline worker and the VO employee or handle the issue in an alternative way. Officials in the VBA headquarters express a preference for this policy, as do many regional office managers. Several regional office supervisors prefer that VOs to talk to supervisors because:

- Employees are not interrupted
- No one is “led down a wrong path”
- Supervisors can see broad trends
- It avoids conflict between VOs and raters

Although some managers do not prefer this type of policy, those who do say that it eliminates the potential that collaboration would reduce timeliness and create problems with production.

### **Impact of Collaboration on Increasing Accuracy and Consistency**

In addition to timeliness, a well-performing claims processing agency makes accurate and consistent decisions. Our interviews reveal that cooperation between the VA and the VOs can have an impact on the extent to which claims are processed accurately and consistently and on how a variety of VA claims raters evaluate their accuracy and consistency.

#### **Positive Impact: Additional Reviews of Claims Improves Accuracy**

For accuracy and consistency in claims decisions, many of the comments from VA employees center on the positive effects of having “a second pair of eyes” examine a rating decision. Several VA managers note that collaboration with the VOs increases accuracy because the VO employee signs off on claims decisions before they are promulgated. As one regional office supervisor states: “They [VOs] are an additional piece of the puzzle in making sure the claims are processed correctly. Sometimes they will point out things I forgot to do or missed and I will do the same.”

VOs, therefore, provide a second opinion on decisions and alert VA staff to issues with claim decisions, such as an overlooked piece of evidence or a possible mistake in the application of current regulations. A VO representative notes that “we help each other not make mistakes.” Personnel in the Connecticut American Legion office provide a good example of this when describing an incident involving a regional office employee who came to their office because a veteran had claimed an injury to his left knee but the medical evidence indicated the problem

was in the right knee. The American Legion was able to quickly phone the veteran to confirm that he had meant to claim an injury for the right knee. Because of this collaboration, the VA was able to make the correct decision faster.

A number of supervisors gain knowledge of the regulations governing the claims process when they read over notices of disagreement filed by VO staff. This type of learning, of course, goes both ways. Personnel from these different organizations can educate each other and can benefit from working side by side. As one VA supervisor puts it: “We’re better because they [the VOs] are here.”

VA-VO collaboration can also improve consistency in decision-making between raters. One regional office supervisor mentions that VO representatives will often come to him if they think that one rater is interpreting regulations differently than they expect or differently from other raters. When this occurs, the supervisor brings the file to a different rater and asks this rater what that rater would have done in this case without explaining why he is asking. If it appears that the rater the VO questioned is misinterpreting the regulations, the supervisor would provide some retraining on that particular type of claim. This helps to improve the accuracy and consistency of the entire process.

### **Negative Impact: Creating Greater Inaccuracy by Fitting Claims to Meet Eligibility Criteria**

The interviewees also suggest that collaboration between outreach organizations and the government could lead to greater inaccuracy in decisions because claimant representatives might learn ways to make claims fit the eligibility criteria. In other words, if non-agency personnel have access to the inner workings of government agencies they may “learn the key.” Although this is not frequently mentioned, it is a concern raised by at least one manager and some VO managers say that the regional office employees are concerned about it. Others in the VA do not share this concern and some think it is helpful for VOs to have as much information as possible.

Additionally, the ability of the VOs to improve accuracy and consistency in the claims process depends on their knowledge of program rules. If VO personnel do not fully understand regulations, giving them access to regional office personnel, especially new employees, might lead to a drop in accuracy in decision-making. Many VA personnel note that VO personnel are well-trained and have the requisite knowledge to improve accuracy in the claims process. However, there is variation in confidence regarding the knowledge of VO staff. For example, a VA supervisor notes that VO staff are accurate about “60% of the time,” explaining that “there are a lot of regulations and they come into it [with] an understanding of it but not all rules and regulation.” It is also noted that, “Unless you are trained to do the [ratings] work it is difficult to understand all of it.” If VO employees lack knowledge of the regulations, then they might lead VA employees “down the wrong path,” which might lead to less accurate claims decisions.

Another concern is that if VA employees interact too much with VOs, they may be putting veterans who are not represented by a VO at a disadvantage. There is a concern that collaboration with VOs may lead to more inconsistency and a lack of fairness. Regional office managers are, without exception, quick to point out that veterans with or without VO representation are treated exactly the same. It does seem, however, to be to the veterans’ advantage to have some sort of representation. In 2004, for example, the average annual disability payments for veterans with representation were \$6,225 higher than the payments for those without representation (VA Inspector General 2005). There is no reason to think that this advantage is derived from anything other than having a knowledgeable representative helping to navigate the process.

**Mitigating negative impacts on accuracy and consistency.** Many VA and VO personnel suggest ways to mitigate the potential negative effects of collaboration on accuracy and consistency. First, VA and, particularly, VO employees discuss that it is important for VO employees to develop a reputation as professional advocates. This requires the VO personnel to work inside the rules and regulations of the VDC program. While VO employees advocate strongly for their clients, they do not try to push through awards that are clearly outside the limits of the law. As one VO manager puts it:

In this profession we are dealing with people's lives; their livelihood, their families, the whole nine yards. One mistake and it could be a matter between life or death or homelessness or not. I take it seriously and the majority of regional offices do too. The regional office is going through changes and it takes time. It is hard to explain that to a veteran whose only source of income is veteran benefits. I wish every veteran could be rated at 100% but there are laws in place. I tell my service officers to be straightforward, honest, and to point out the regulations to the veteran and tell him or her that this is what we need.

These types of advocates are honest with their clients about their claims and the likelihood that they will be awarded. Many VO employees describe this as being an "honest broker" or "professional advocate." If VO personnel act in this way and cultivate this type of reputation, then many of the VA's concerns over the potential negative effects of collaboration on accuracy and consistency would be allayed.

Second, many of the VA employees we interviewed suggest that regulating the access that VO employees have to frontline VA employees through the supervisor-first policy helps to attenuate the potential negative consequences of collaboration for accuracy and consistency. If the VO representatives think the VA employee made an inaccurate decision, the VO staff would bring questions, comments, etc., to the supervisor first, and then either the supervisor would take care of the issue or would arrange a meeting between the VO employee and the VA employee. According to some VA supervisors, this approach has a number of advantages, including limiting the potential for VA employees to be misled (intentionally or unintentionally) by VO representatives to decide claims in ways inconsistent with VA interpretation of regulations.

Third, many VO and VA personnel recommend joint training sessions as a way to make sure that everyone involved in the process has the same understanding of the regulations governing the VDC program. Joint training also helps to address the concern that some VO personnel do not have the requisite knowledge of the regulations or that the training received by the VO employees is uneven. While everyone who suggests this understands that the organizations are separate entities and that some training should be separate, joint training is suggested as a way to cover some basic issues or cover issues that come up repeatedly, which would save time in the long run and help to ensure that everyone is working from the same understanding.

Richard Dumancas, currently the deputy director for claims, the American Legion, and previously the director of the County Veterans Service Office in Minnesota, describes the collaborative relationship in Minnesota as unbelievably good, and he attributes the strong working relationship in large part to the training that the VA provided to the veterans service officers. He explains that while he was working in Minnesota he asked the service center manager in the Minnesota regional office to look through the claims submitted by county veterans service officers, look for mistakes that were consistently appearing, and provide training on those issues. The service center manager and her staff provided the requested training, and it improved both the collaborative relationship in Minnesota and the claims process.

## Impact of Collaboration on Customer Service

### Positive Impact: Improving the Quality of Customer Service to Veterans

In addition to timeliness, accuracy, and consistency, the interviews highlight the role that collaboration between the VA and VOs plays in improving the customer service that veterans receive. Customer service involves helping veterans understand the program and the process while being treated with compassion and respect. Because many of the VO representatives are veterans and many have experience with personally filing for VDC benefits (for example, all DAV service officers are, by rule, disabled veterans and all American Legion service officers are veterans), they can relate to the experiences of the veterans. This experience, and the fact that they are not VA personnel, make it more likely that veterans will trust the information that they receive from VO personnel about the VDC program, and that the information will be easily understandable by veterans.

The VOs provide an important service to the VA by working as intermediaries between the veteran and the VA. The VO employees are often the first people whom veterans talk to about benefits when they come to the regional offices, because the VOs are located in the same buildings as the VA employees, and veterans are often directed to the VOs by the front desk. Thus, the VOs play an important customer relations role by being the first public contact for the VDC program. VO employees spend a great deal of time explaining the program to veterans, and helping them determine the benefits for which they might be eligible. Additionally, when veterans have a question or concern about their claim, they often call or visit their VO representative instead of VA employees.

The VOs field a tremendous number of calls from veterans, and this helps to eliminate the burden on the VA. The VA can thus focus more attention on processing claims quickly and accurately, which allows them to provide better service to veterans. VA employees recognize the importance of these functions.

Quality collaboration can improve the customer service that the VA provides because the VOs can alert regional office managers when frontline workers are not providing good customer service. Regional office personnel process a vast number of cases, and it is easy for frontline workers to become desensitized. Furthermore, VA frontline workers are experiencing high levels of pressure to process many cases quickly, which might increase the likelihood that they respond impatiently when interacting with veterans. As mentioned earlier, VO employees attend appeals with veterans and so they witness interactions and can inform managers when the VA is not providing top customer service. Managers can then remind frontline employees about the importance of providing quality customer service to veterans.

One VA supervisor, for example, describes how collaboration with the VOs enhances his ability to make sure his team provides good customer service. One important aspect of customer service is allowing the veteran to have the appeal heard. There are instances, however, where it is clear to the regional office employees that the claim does not meet the regulations. The regional office employee can sometimes rush through the appeal and give the veteran the impression that he or she is not fully listening to what the veteran is saying. VO representatives will let him know, however, when this happens and can remind regional office employees of the importance of allowing the veteran to have his or her grievances heard. Sue Malley, director of the New York regional office, also describes an incident where the VOs alerted her to a problem with customer service. Without the VOs, she would not have known about the issue.

# Strategies and Actions to Increase Effective Collaboration

Interviews for this report reveal specific strategies that managers can use to increase levels of trust, expand the level of expertise and resources, and support the frequency and quality of communication between the Department of Veterans Affairs and the veterans organizations.

Based on our interviews, we set forth five strategies to encourage collaboration between VA and VOs. We believe these strategies could apply to other benefit determination programs where there are outreach organizations actively involved.

- **Strategy One:** Highlight shared goals
- **Strategy Two:** Encourage collaboration throughout the organization
- **Strategy Three:** Build trust through honest communication and access
- **Strategy Four:** Build trust through expertise and provide training
- **Strategy Five:** Serve as honest brokers

## Strategy One: Highlight Shared Goals

Although government agencies and outreach organizations do not have the same process goals, they do share common outcome goals of providing benefits to those who meet the eligibility criteria and treating all applicants with respect. Highlighting these shared goals both in public and private discussions and documents creates higher levels of trust between the government and outreach organizations.

One reason for the positive relationship between regional office and VO managers is the recognition that they share the common goal of advocating for veterans. As one VA supervisor explains: “We have a good relationship because we all have the same goals. We both want to help the vet; we both want to try to move our cases forward to whatever the next step may be. We do not want to waste their time, and they do not want to waste our time.” A VO supervisor corroborates this view, stating, “The relationship between the regional office staff and the VO staff is excellent because we recognize that the regional offices in our state are full of hardworking, dedicated, well-intentioned people, and it is the process that sometimes gets in the way, not the people.” When the personnel from the two groups recognize their shared mission, it is more likely that both groups will develop trust and work together to improve agency performance.

When trust in shared goals does not exist, regional office personnel may be less likely to approach VO employees to help with claims processing, or be less likely to believe the information provided by VO staff. Likewise, VO employees may also be less likely to work with regional offices to resolve problems and may be more likely to engage in practices, such as more case appeals, that make it more difficult for regional office staff to deal with their large backlogs. It is very important, therefore, that regional offices and VOs build trust by highlighting their shared values.

Regional office and VO managers can increase awareness of shared goals, and thereby increase trust, by talking about and taking actions that emphasize their shared values to their employees. In the Waco regional office, for example, the DAV National Area Supervisor Kent Hoffman indicates that one reason he is very optimistic about the collaborative relationship in the regional office in Waco is because of a meeting the new regional office director, John Limpose, had with all regional office personnel. In this meeting, the director asked all regional office employees who were veterans to stand up. When a good number did, he asked all regional office employees with family members who were veterans to stand up, and another large portion of the room stood up. He finally asked all regional office employees with friends who were veterans to stand up, and the rest of the room stood up. This incident helped to increase Hoffman's confidence that the regional office director is motivated by the same thing that motivates him—helping veterans. While the regional office director may not have done this to improve collaboration, this simple act did help to build trust and confidence between the two organizations.

A perceived lack of shared values can reduce collaborative activities such as joint training. A VO manager indicates that the regional office seemed reluctant to provide joint training, both because the regional office was preoccupied with training their own new employees, and also because of the perception that the regional office and VOs have different objectives.

## Strategy Two: Encourage Collaboration Throughout the Organization

Many regional office and VO managers say that the encouragement for collaboration at the top of the organization plays a role in determining whether the regional office and VOs use collaboration to improve government performance. Several managers within VOs expressed the view that collaboration had gotten better in recent years because of the importance that Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki and Under Secretary for Benefits Allison Hickey, who heads the VBA, have placed on it. Secretary Shinseki meets with leaders of the six largest VSOs almost every month in order to get their feedback on the VA's performance and its various initiatives. Peter Gaytan, executive director of the American Legion, describes Secretary Shinseki as "very accessible" and notes that he has been "interviewed at least twice for the Legion's magazine and has appeared at its national convention every year since taking office" (Dao 2012).

Several VO representatives interviewed at the local level credit an improvement in collaboration to General Shinseki's direction to the VA to work more closely with the VOs. Under Secretary Hickey has also been lauded by the VOs for her collaborative efforts. The DAV's National Legislative Director Joseph A. Violante recently praised Under Secretary Hickey for her efforts in working with the VOs to improve claims process, saying, "The open and candid attitude of the VBA's leadership, particularly Under Secretary Hickey, led toward developing a true partnership with DAV and other veterans service organizations which assist veterans in filing claims." (Wilborn 2012).

Leadership within a regional office also plays a strong role in encouraging collaboration. Many people interviewed express the view that when the director of the regional office encourages collaboration, it central to how much collaboration actually takes place within the office. VO employees notice the accessibility and tone of the regional office director. "If I have something to say and I want to go talk to him [the director], I would not think twice about it. Past directors were not that way," says Alexis Cook, senior administrative assistant, The American Legion, Connecticut.

Leadership in the VOs is also important. It enhances collaboration if the VOs and regional offices view each other as partners rather than adversaries. A VO representative notes, “It is important for VO managers to understand that VA is an advocate, too.” VO managers can encourage quality collaboration by promoting an image of the VA as a partner, not the enemy.

### **Actions to Implement the Strategy**

**Encourage and reward collaborative activity.** One way to set a positive tone is to actively praise collaborative behavior, and this is more effective when it comes from as high a level as possible in the organization. Directors and managers should encourage employees to use the knowledge of the VO employees (talk about it in meetings; if you see it, praise it, etc.). Several VO staff express the view that General Shinseki sets the tone for greater collaboration with the VOs through statements he has made and actions he has taken since becoming secretary of Veterans Affairs. Managers can also encourage collaboration by using engagement in collaborative behavior as a criterion on which to evaluate employees. One VO supervisor, for example, will not retain employees who have not acted in ways that facilitate cooperation with the regional office or who file claims in ways that unnecessarily make the regional office’s work more difficult.

It is also important to highlight to regional office employees that VO employees are a resource. We heard from several supervisors that many VA employees in the past had viewed the VO personnel as adversaries and did not consider them helpful in claims processing. These supervisors note that this perception has changed in their regional office, and that they have worked to show their employees the benefits of working with VO employees.

**Find creative ways to take full advantage of collaborative relationships.** There are many opportunities to realize the potential of partnerships between outreach organizations and government agencies, such as formally hiring personnel as temporary workers on particular projects and asking outreach organization personnel to review case files to identify cases that are missing just one piece of documentation or those that could be decided without a formal appeal. An example of a creative approach in the Waco VA regional office is presented in the box, *Collaboration in Texas*, on page 31.

## **Strategy Three: Build Trust through Honest Communication and Access**

Large caseloads and backlogs make personnel in government and outreach organizations very pressed for time, so reducing the amount of time it takes to collaborate is helpful. Managers and staff can prepare summaries and notes with easily understood points that are quick to communicate. VOs are more effective at communicating concerns to regional office personnel when they have fully researched the regulations and have full understanding of the case prior to approaching the regional office personnel.

One frequently mentioned theme is the importance of honesty and communication on the part of both the VO personnel and the regional office personnel. On the regional office side, communicating with the VOs about developments in the office and communicating the rationale for claim denials are frequently cited as important aspects of honest communication. On the VO side, honest communication with the VA employees and veterans and communicating problems to the regional office staff and not to the media are frequently noted as key parts of a good collaborative communication.

## Collaboration in Texas

The Texas Veterans' Commission (TVC) and the Waco, Texas, VA regional office engaged in two joint initiatives in the past (the Development Assistance Pilot Project and the Claims Processing Assistance teams) and are in the process of starting a third joint project (the TVC Strike Force and Fully Developed Claim Team). In these initiatives, the TVC and the Waco regional office teamed up to speed up claims processing by having TVC counselors work in the Waco regional office under the supervision of a VA supervisor. In these initiatives, the TVC employees performed such tasks as contacting veterans to gather evidence for initial claims, and reviewed pending appeals to identify and collect any evidence that would resolve the appeal. Once evidence was gathered, the file was turned over to regional office personnel for further processing (Interview with Virginia Richards, assistant director of the Waco regional office; House 2007).

Both the leadership within the Waco regional office and the TVC spoke very positively about the collaboration in these two pilot programs. Jim Richman described the Development Assistance Pilot Project as "a successful experiment that showed how we were able to team up with VA to assist more veterans" (quoted in House 2007, 7). Virginia Richards, assistant director of the VA regional office, noted that collaborating with the TVC was helpful for several reasons:

- First, it allowed the TVC to hire highly experienced, well-trained temporary workers to work in the VA and help the VA deal with the backlog.
- Second, having the TVC employees work in the VA allowed the VA to target work in line with the VA's priorities.
- Third, TVC employees brought special skills in communicating with veterans to the process because of their work in the TVC.

There were some minor challenges in these pilot programs (interview with Virginia Richards):

- The VA Office of General Counsel limited some of the things that TVC employees could do, such as limiting TVC employees to cases where veterans had given the TVC the power to be their representative.
- Training was required on VA-specific rules about protecting information.
- The TVC had to find funding from the state of Texas to temporarily replace the TVC employees who worked in the regional office.

Overall, the experiences with the pilot programs in Waco suggest that these types of collaborative efforts could be developed in other locations if state governments or charitable groups can provide funding. This seems to be the biggest obstacle in increasing the number of formal collaborative projects across the country.

On the regional office side, honesty about what is really happening in the regional office seems to create trust between the two organizations' staff. It is useful for VO personnel to know when there is a holdup with a particular type of claim because this allows them to better communicate the circumstances to the veterans. When they do not know what is going on, it adds confusion and frustration to the process.

For example, at one regional office, there was a technical problem in the computer system, with claims showing up as paid when they were not. VO personnel were not, however, informed of this quickly, so it took up a lot of time to figure out what was happening and why. Many VO employees note frustration that they are not always notified of policy or process changes in the regional offices that would affect them. The VO employees say that it is important for them to be kept in the loop on developments because they are often the ones interacting with the veteran.

On the regional office side, several people suggest that one way regional office managers could improve relationships with the VOs would be to explain denials when VO staff have questions about them. Supervisors attribute improvements in collaboration to increased efforts to explain denials. A VA supervisor says, “When the VOs do not know the reason behind the denial, they have the belief that you are just looking to deny first. Even though this has never been the case, this is the image that comes across when you don’t explain it. This makes it hard for the VOs to look at the denial objectively.” Although in the short run, it may take extra time to explain the reasons for denials, it saves time in the long run because the VOs have a better understanding when they handle new cases.

From the VO side, several VO managers bring up how important it is for them and their employees to be honest about a veteran’s situation. If VO representatives are not honest with veterans, they will lose credibility with the VA personnel, which will adversely affect their ability to help all veterans.

Several VO managers indicate that when there is a problem it is important for them to talk to the regional office managers honestly. They should not “air their dirty laundry” in the outside world. As one VO supervisor notes: “We do not VA-bash in public. If something is going wrong, I have serious conversations with them [VA staff], but it is behind closed doors. You can get a lot more done talking reasonably—an adult conversation goes a long way.”

### Actions to Implement the Strategy

During our interviews, the following specific actions were recommended as ways in which communication can be improved between the VA and VOs:

**Be aware of tone and decorum.** Almost all managers from VO and the VA stress the importance of decorum when interacting. Many suggest that they have to be careful how they ask for things. If they ask for something or bring up a concern in a disrespectful manner, it will reduce the ability to get the most out of the collaborative relationship. As a VO representative explains: “It makes a difference how you approach them [VA personnel]. If you go up and accuse them [VA personnel] of not processing a claim correctly, that is not going to be taken well. But if you respectfully ask them to point out why a case was decided one way or what you overlooked, then you will likely have better luck.”

One bad interaction can brand an organization as difficult to work with, and it takes a long time to repair the relationship. A bad interaction can shape how VA personnel view all VO employees. A VA supervisor states: “When I first started out, I viewed them [the VO representatives] with suspicion because of a negative interaction with one person from a VO. But as I have been here longer and I got to be a supervisor and developed relationships with the VO, I realize we couldn’t function without them.”

**Structure lines of communication.** Accessibility must be balanced with limiting disruptions. One way to do this is to structure the lines of communication so that VO employees talk first to VA supervisors about claims issues rather than contacting the frontline VA employees directly. Most VA supervisors with a strong preference seem to prefer having VO staff work through supervisors, although there is some disagreement on this point. The argument in favor of a supervisor-first policy is that it reduces disruptions and allows supervisors to see trends. VA managers in regional offices that have large backlogs uniformly endorse a supervisor-first policy to reduce distractions and allow frontline employees to continue making claims decisions. This policy can also save the VO employees time because they do not have to try to locate the particular VA employee who is working the claim. None of the VOs interviewed have a problem with a supervisor-first policy. But some worry that the frontline VA employees

will think that the VO staff are trying to go above them; these VO employees say it is important for the policy to be clear to the whole office if it is adopted.

Communication could also be structured by creating a position that serves as liaison between VOs and regional offices in order to enhance communication. In the Waco regional office, VO managers noted that they felt they were better able to learn about new policies after the office hired a change management agent. The change management agent had the responsibility to make sure the VO employees were apprised of policy changes as the regional office worked to implement new regulations.

**Increase responsiveness.** Several VA managers talk about the importance of being responsive to inquiries from VOs and vice versa. VA and VO personnel should appreciate each other's deadlines and time demands. As a VA supervisor notes: "The VOs won't collaborate with us if they feel there is a lack of receptiveness. Don't ignore them even if you just say I can't respond right now." And there is definitely a reciprocal nature to responsiveness. "A lot of VA employees have not had a good experience and so are reluctant to involve them [veterans service officers]. If you send it [a claim] to a VO and if it is there a week, then you are not motivated to go back to that person. I think that I could have sent a letter in that same time," recalls Joe Corretjer, service center manager, New York regional office.

**Hold regularly scheduled meetings.** The most consistently mentioned action to encourage a quality relationship between the VA and VOs is to hold regular meetings. All of the regional offices that we visited either have regularly scheduled meetings or have plans to begin holding them. An overwhelming majority of those interviewed believe regular meetings are essential to collaboration. One VA supervisor stresses the importance of meetings between regional offices and VOs, stating, "The VSOs and the state veterans affairs agency make us aware of veteran issues and meetings are key for that to happen." Meetings provide a number of benefits:

- Many representatives from VOs say that regularly scheduled meetings provided the best opportunity for them to learn about new policies or procedures. These employees provide myriad examples of information that they lacked which could have easily been conveyed in a meeting.
- Many regional office and VO managers say that regularly scheduled meetings between regional offices and VOs provide one of the best venues for the VO employees to express concerns about any problematic patterns across cases. Discussing the issues with one case is also helpful because it allows the VA and VO employees to assess whether a problem is systematic and to learn things about regulations and processes with a concrete example.
- Meetings also provide the opportunity for face-to-face interactions, which many believe help to enhance collaborative efforts between VOs and the regional office. If VA and VO employees feel comfortable with one another and have face-to-face contact on a regular basis, then it is more likely that trust will build between the groups and they will learn to appreciate each other.

While regular meetings are almost universally hailed as essential for a good collaborative relationship, many VA and VO employees note that the meetings need a clear agenda and strong leadership to help the discussion stay on point. Many employees suggest that the director should attend because the director can make the meeting more focused. Also, many recommend that both the director and the service center manager attend, because then it is more likely that all employees will be on the same page and information is less likely to be missed.

**Enhance accessibility.** The accessibility of agency/office leaders and other high-level personnel builds trust and increases the likelihood that collaboration can be used to improve performance of government agencies.

In the VDC program, this includes making sure that VO personnel have physical space within the regional office. While this is the norm in most regional offices, many regional offices are tight on space, which is creating a challenge to keeping VO employees in the same office. Almost everyone we interviewed discusses how having the VO personnel located in the same building as the regional office increases the ability for collaboration.

The physical presence of the VO personnel in the same building makes collaboration a lot easier because VO personnel do not have to travel in order to talk to regional office personnel in person and vice versa, and VO staff have greater access to files. When personnel share an office, relationships develop more naturally and with less effort than when individuals are located in different areas. This is not to say that these collaborative relationships cannot exist when the VOs and the VA maintain offices in separate buildings, it is just more challenging. Although the importance of a shared physical space may decrease some when all documents are electronic, for the time being, occupying the same office building makes it much easier to collaborate.

## Strategy Four: Build Trust through Expertise and Joint Training

Across the board, the interviews reveal that collaboration between the VA and the VOs decreases when one partner does not have a high level of expertise in the case processing system and program rules. VA managers frequently provide examples of how they were able to do their jobs better when they could count on the VO personnel to have quality training and a high level of expertise in the program. When the regional office personnel think that the VO staff does not have a high level of training or a good understanding of program rules, they are much more reluctant to use collaboration to improve government performance. One VA supervisor describes how his manager asked him to work with a VO employee who had offered to go over old appeals. He explains that while he has worked with other VO representatives, whom he found very helpful, he did not have faith in the quality of this particular VO employee's work, and was, therefore, reluctant to work with him. One former senior VA official believes that a lack of training led the relationships between VOs and the regional offices to sometimes become adversarial.

### Actions to Implement Strategy

**Take advantage of informal training opportunities.** Program expertise can be built through informal communications between VO and VA personnel. Back-and-forth communication can help both VA and VO staff learn more about program rules and their interpretation. Informal communications between government personnel and outreach personnel about particular cases can be learning opportunities. Although in the short run communicating about particular cases might seem to waste time, early investments in discussing cases can lead to long-term benefits. Both government and outreach workers can take lessons learned from those exchanges and apply them to future cases, improving the overall process. These exchanges can occur during communications between individuals and also at meetings where particular cases can be used as examples to illustrate problems.

**Offer joint training.** Program expertise can be built formally through training. VA employees receive training through the department, and sometimes offer joint training sessions for the VO employees. All of the VOs with whom we spoke also provide some training to their employees, though there is variation in the intensity. Some of the VOs that offer extensive training to their employees share their expertise with staff from other VOs and regional office personnel by giving presentations at meetings or sharing training material.

VA should provide joint training with government and outreach personnel and share training modules, techniques, etc. This helps to ensure that all collaborative partners have similar

levels of expertise and can help to build respect for the knowledge of the other organization. This training should not only focus on explaining regulations but also focus on ways that claims can be filed to make processing them more efficient.

While providing such training has challenges, it does have the potential to increase the ability of the outreach personnel to file claims appropriately and interpret regulations. This allows VOs to better educate potential applicants to file claims in ways that do not cause unnecessary delay. This training could be given to a limited number of outreach representatives by the government, then distributed to a larger audience through joint training exercises across outreach organizations. Also, experts from outreach organizations can be brought in to provide training for government employees.

### **Strategy Five: Serve as Honest Brokers**

Whether government employees use outreach organization employees as a resource when processing claims and whether outreach organization employees consider it worthwhile to help government employees is affected by whether each thinks the other is an honest broker.

A quality collaborative relationship between government agencies and outreach organizations cannot survive if government employees view outreach organization employees as advising claimants in a less than honest manner, or as appealing every decision regardless of the merit. A quality collaborative relationship is also difficult if outreach organization employees view government employees as denying every claim that comes their way regardless of merit.

In order for the full benefits of collaboration for government performance to be realized, outreach organizations must instill in their workers the importance of being honest with potential applicants about how their situation fits or does not fit within eligibility rules, as well as how what they file for will create potential delays in their cases. Furthermore, outreach organization employees must be honest with government personnel about applications. On the other hand, government agencies must inculcate a culture of fair and accurate claims processing that gives each case its due and communicate that to outreach organizations. Specific ways of doing this include having regional office personnel explain the reasons behind denials and for management to stress the VA's mission of helping veterans as well as correctly implementing VA programs.

# Appendix I: Research Methodology

The primary data used in this report come from approximately 40 interviews with people with intimate knowledge of the VDC program and the collaboration between the Department of Veterans Affairs, the VSOs, and the SVAs. Officials (retired and current) from the Department of Veterans Affairs and VSOs were interviewed in both central and local-level offices. Officials from SVAs were also interviewed at their local regional offices.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the interviews, a variety of documents were reviewed, such as Government Accountability Office reports, VA Inspector General reports, and congressional hearing testimony. Specific attention focused on determining the extent to which collaboration improves government performance, the potential pitfalls of collaboration, and the best practices for realizing the benefits of collaboration while avoiding the pitfalls.

## Locations of Interviews

**Central office in Washington, D.C.** We conducted in-person and telephone interviews with current and retired federal employees from the VA central office as well as the VA Inspector General's office. We also interviewed officials stationed in Washington, D.C. from the DAV, VFW, and the American Legion. These interviews were conducted May 25 to May 27, 2012 in person and in August 2012 by telephone.

**VA regional offices.** Interviews with supervisors at VA regional offices were conducted in person in three different locations:

- Hartford, Connecticut (June 18–June 19, 2012)
- New York, New York (June 20–June 22, 2012)
- Waco, Texas (July 9–July 11, 2012)

Follow-up phone interviews with personnel who were unavailable for the in-person visits were conducted in August 2012.

Interviews were conducted with the regional office director, the service center manager, and supervisors with experience in pre-determination, ratings, and appeals in the VDC program at each of these locations. Supervisors and service officers from the DAV, American Legion, and SVAs in these locations were also interviewed.<sup>3</sup> Although only three different regional offices were visited, many interviewees had worked in other regional offices. The Waco regional office

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2. To ensure candid responses from interviewees, the identity of interviewees is kept confidential. All identifying information is excluded from the report except when interviewees had the opportunity to review a quote and approve being quoted by name. For the unidentified quotes, gendered pronouns are used at random.

3. DAV and American Legion managers were interviewed in all three locations. Officials from state veterans agencies were interviewed in Hartford and Waco but not in New York.

director, John Limpose, for example, had experience in St. Petersburg, Florida, and Ohio, and the New York regional office director, Sue Malley, had experience in North Carolina and Minnesota as well as experience in the central office in D.C. and the Eastern Area office. As such, even though we visited three regional offices, the people interviewed had experience with collaboration in a variety of locations. The regional offices visited are profiled in Table A-1.

**Table A-1: Profile of Regional Offices**

Regional Office	# FTE	Veteran Service Center FTE	Pending Cases	Average # Days Processing	Average # Days Processing for veterans filing for the first time <sup>d</sup>	Rating Accuracy
Hartford, CT <sup>a</sup>	108	84	2,352	116.6	320	84.1
New York, NY <sup>b</sup>	210	172	12,977	257.1	642	75.1
Waco, TX <sup>c</sup>	710	527	19,084	157.6	528	83.8

<sup>a</sup> Source: VA Office of Inspector General, Inspection of the VA Regional Office Hartford, CT (2011)

<sup>b</sup> Source: VA Office of Inspector General, Inspection of the VA Regional Office New York, NY (2011)

<sup>c</sup> Source: VA Office of Inspector General, Inspection of VA Regional Office Waco, TX (2010)

<sup>d</sup> Source: <http://cironline.org/reports/map-where-veterans-backlog-worst-3792>

## Appendix II: Background Information on Veterans Service Organizations

There are many veterans service organizations (VSOs). (See Table A-2 for a list of VSOs that can represent veterans.) While all play important roles, we focus on the history and the claims assistance role of the big three:

- Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), founded in 1899
- American Legion, founded in 1919
- Disabled American Veterans (DAV), formed in 1920

While the three groups have differences in membership and some specific objectives, they are unified in their commitment to expanding veterans benefits (Ridgway 2011). These groups grew quickly. For example, within one year of the American Legion's founding, close to 20 percent of World War I veterans were members (Ridgway 2011). Because of their size, the VSOs soon gained political clout. These organizations were a driving force behind the consolidation of the Bureau of War Risk Insurance, Public Health Service, and the Federal Board of Vocational Education to form the Veterans Bureau (now the VA) in 1921, and also helped to increase the monthly payments for fully disabled veterans from \$30 to \$80 (Ridgway 2011). In addition to advocating for legislation that would benefit veterans, VSOs provide outreach and assist veterans to claim veterans' benefits. These service organizations now play an essential role in the process by providing outreach to veterans who might be entitled to government benefits and also by helping them navigate the somewhat daunting claims process.

In recognition of their service to veterans and their important role in implementing veterans programs, Congress chartered many veterans service organizations. The American Legion was congressionally chartered in 1919, the DAV was chartered in 1932, and the VFW was chartered in 1936. While a federal charter "does not make these organizations 'agencies of the United States,' confer any governmental powers, or assign any benefits" (Moe 2001, p. 302), it does indicate governmental sanction of an organization's mission and can serve as a governmental tool for achieving a government objective (Kosar 2006). The special status of a congressional charter conferred on some veterans service organizations helped to solidify the close relationship between veterans service organizations and the VA and facilitate the organizations' integral role in the implementation of the VDC program. For example, while unchartered veterans service organizations now have offices within regional VA offices, until 1992 the VA only conferred this special privilege to congressionally chartered organizations (Moe 2004). Efforts by Congress set the stage for a close relationship between VSOs and the VA in the VDC program.

Besides private attorneys hired by veterans, VSOs and state government veterans agencies are the only representatives of veterans for disability compensation-claiming purposes recognized by VA (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs 2012). The representatives from the VSOs function as attorneys-in-fact, assisting veterans who are claiming VDC benefits, which is a role

**Table A-2: VA-Recognized Veterans Service Organizations**

<b>RECOGNIZED SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS</b>	
Membership in an organization is not a prerequisite to appointment of the organization as claimant's representative.	
The following is a listing of national, regional, or local organizations recognized by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs in the preparation, presentation, and prosecution of claims under laws administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs.	
African American PTSD Association	National Association for Black Veterans, Inc.
American Legion	National Veterans Legal Services Program
American Red Cross	National Veterans Organization of America
AMVETS	Non Commissioned Officers Association of the USA
American Ex-Prisoners of War, Inc.	Navy Mutual Aid Association
American GI Forum, National Veterans Outreach Program	Paralyzed Veterans of America, Inc.
Armed Forces Services Corporation	Polish Legion of American Veterans, U.S.A.
Army and Navy Union, USA	Swords to Plowshares, Veterans Rights Organization, Inc.
Associates of Vietnam Veterans of America	The Retired Enlisted Association
Blinded Veterans Association	The Veterans Assistance Foundation, Inc.
Catholic War Veterans of the U.S.A.	The Veterans of the Vietnam War, Inc. & The Veterans Coalition
Disabled American Veterans	United Spanish War Veterans of the United States
Fleet Reserve Association	United Spinal Association, Inc.
Gold Star Wives of America, Inc.	Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States
Italian American War Veterans of the United States, Inc.	Veterans of World War I of the U.S.A., Inc.
Jewish War Veterans of the United States	Vietnam Era Veterans Association
Legion of Valor of the United States of America, Inc.	Vietnam Veterans of America
Marine Corps League	West Virginia Department of Veterans Assistance
Military Order of the Purple Heart	Wounded Warrior Project
National Amputation Foundation, Inc.	
National Association of County Veterans Service Officers, Inc.	

**Source:** U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. VA Form 21-22, February 2012

that is primarily played by attorneys in other eligibility determination programs, such as Social Security disability. The VSOs provide these services free of charge to both members and non-members. The VFW (2007) describes their claims assistance function in the following way:

“VFW department service officers (DSOs) are located in every federal Department of Veterans Affairs regional office. Each acts as a liaison between individual veterans and VA to help them get benefits they deserve. Duties include:

- Explaining benefits and helping vets through the often-bureaucratic maze
- Guiding and supporting vets through months of claims processing
- Granting power of attorney, helping vets prepare necessary documents and evidence, monitoring cases, and keeping vets informed of recent developments
- Assisting by phone vets who can't personally get to VA regional offices”

Some VSOs, such as the DAV, the American Legion, and VFW, have accredited service officers in all VA regional offices.<sup>4</sup> Their claims assistance role is a major function of many VSOs.

As noted earlier, there are many VSOs that are authorized to represent claimants in the VDC process. VA informs veterans of the services provided by these organizations. On their website, the VA portrays these organizations as part of the implementation network by describing them as “partners,” and explains that these organizations can assist with disability compensation claims and can represent claimants if the group is officially recognized (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs 2012). Also, in the description of many of the VA regional offices, the VA lists the VSOs that are located in their office. Some VSOs, such as the DAV and the American

4. The VSOs and state veterans agencies often share veterans service officers. These service officers represent claimants for the different service organizations with which they are affiliated.

Legion, provide service representatives in each state. Other VSOs, such as the VFW, provide service representatives in some states but work with state veterans agencies to provide these services in other states. Profiles of the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, and Veterans of Foreign Wars are presented in Table A-3.

As noted above, Congress chartered some VSOs very early in the development of the modern VA and the VDC program, which helped to set the stage for a close relationship between VSOs and the VA. Without this congressional recognition of veterans groups as assets in fulfilling the government's mission of serving veterans, the collaboration of the VSOs and the VA might not be possible today. Today the VSOs play an integral role in the implementation of the VDC program.

Today VSOs and SVAs represent thousands of veterans in their VDC claims every year. In 2005, 64.7% of VDC recipients had power of attorney representation (Hunter et al. 2006). While this number includes veterans who were represented by private attorneys, most veterans use VSOs and SVAs given that their services are free and they have offices in the same buildings as the regional offices. In 2011, the DAV alone represented "nearly a quarter million veterans and their families in claims for VA benefits" (Augustine 2012, 3). Looking at appeals only, the American Legion handled 8,496 disability claims appeals in 2011 (The American Legion 2011).

### The Role of VSOs

VSOs play a central role in three aspects of the VDC program by:

- **National-level policy advocacy:** VSOs provide feedback on performance and participate in policy reform at the national level.
- **Outreach:** VSOs provide outreach to veterans, informing them of the variety of programs available to veterans at the local and national level.
- **Frontline claims assistance:** VSOs provide claims assistance to veterans who are filing claims for benefits at the local and national level.

**Table A-3: Profile of the Three Largest Veterans Service Organizations**

	The American Legion <sup>a</sup>	Disabled American Veterans <sup>b</sup>	Veterans of Foreign Wars <sup>a</sup>
Membership	2.4 million	1.2 million	1.45 million
Year Founded	1919	1920	1899
Year Congressionally Chartered	1919	1932	1936
Number of Service Officers	56 department service officers and 2,500 accredited representatives	~260 national service officers and 31 transition service officers	60 department service officers and over 1,250 accredited representatives
Number of Veterans Represented Annually	1.3 million	Nearly 250,000	125,000
Budget for Claims Assistance	Not available; handled by individual departments	\$40,396,581	\$1.4 million

<sup>a</sup> Information provided by VSO representative.

<sup>b</sup> Information on the number of service officers, number of veterans represented annually, and budget for claims assistance from Augustine 2012.

## National-Level Policy Advocacy

The VSOs are extremely active in policy advocacy at the national level in a variety of ways.

**They provide feedback while reforms are being considered.** VA officials frequently seek input from the VSOs and SVAs when they are adopting new administrative reforms in the system. One example of this given by DAV officials in Washington D.C., was that VA included the VSOs in designing new computer programs aimed at increasing the efficiency of claims processing. Although these interactions do not resolve all of the issues to the satisfaction of the VSOs, they do make it more likely that they will be addressed. The VSOs also review and provide comments on VDC regulations before and after they are published in the federal register.

**They provide recommendations on the implementation of new initiatives.** The VSOs are well-positioned to communicate implementation problems from the local level to the national level office. When VSO representatives identify problematic patterns in regional offices, they pass those up the line to their national association representatives. The VSOs also have national level conferences and meetings where they share information about problems. The national level VSO officials are then able to assess whether these problems are nation-wide or unique to a particular regional office and alert the central office to these problems. The national level VSO officials can then bring up these issues with the central office of the VA. While the central office also receives information from its regional offices, having another source of information provides the central office with a more complete view of the performance of the VA across the nation.

Edna M. MacDonald, former deputy director for operations, Compensation and Pension Service, Veterans Benefits Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs, and current director of the Nashville regional office, provided an example of how interactions between the VA and VSOs can help improve the implementation of new policy. One recent VA reform is the Fully Developed Claims Initiative, which is aimed at speeding up claims that the veteran or the VSO has completed. One early problem with this initiative was how it affected the starting date of benefits for veterans. The VBA held a summit with the VSOs and was able to resolve this particular problem.

**They advocate for VA funding during the congressional appropriations process.** The VSOs are an important ally for the VA in its efforts to receive adequate congressional appropriations to deal with the immense number of applications for benefits. The DAV, American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, and the VFW have, for example, identified areas in which the VA needs more resources and worked together to draft a budget and policy document to provide to members of Congress (An Independent Budget for FY 2012 and Executive Summary). The VSOs work closely with members of Congress on VA issues. Their support during the congressional budget process has had a positive outcome on the final authorization and appropriations levels for VA. Recently, the VSOs helped successfully advocated to Congress to allow the VA to hire more people. Since 2008, the VA has hired 4,000 new employees (Dao 2012).

**They advocate to Congress and VA for changes in program rules.** The VSOs also work with Congress and the VA to change the law and regulations regarding which benefits are covered by VDC. For example, the VSOs were active in working with Congress and the VA to designate particular diseases as “presumptive” of military service. While this is very helpful to veterans, it increases the number of claims the VA must process as well as makes implementation more challenging because it creates new program rules. VSOs are also active in commenting on proposed regulations by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

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