



*The winning employee ideas will join four pilot programs currently underway to, in the words of Secretary Eric K. Shinseki, “break the back of the backlog.” In March, he visited the Pittsburgh VA Regional Office to observe a pilot there aimed at finding ways to reduce the time required to request and receive evidence. Left to right: Pittsburgh VARO’s Amy Stewart, Secretary Shinseki, veteran James Harper and DAV representative Scott Hope.*

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# Putting Ideas into Action

VA to implement employee ideas to transform claims services.

**W**hen VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki asked employees to help improve the claims process by submitting their ideas, they responded with more than 3,000 submissions aimed at transforming the claims process and ultimately better serving veterans.

“I commend the innovative employees who submitted these creative ideas,” said Shinseki. “The men and women of VA and the veterans service organizations who understand the challenges in our claims processing system have stepped up to deliver tangible results for our nation’s veterans.”

Shinseki called for the competition following President Obama’s announcement last August at the Veterans of Foreign Wars convention: “We’re going to fund the best ideas and put them into action, all with a

simple mission: cut those backlogs, slash those wait times, deliver your benefits sooner,” the President said.

A four-judge panel consisting of former VA Under Secretary for Benefits Adm. Patrick W. Dunne; Craiglist founder Craig Newmark; Senior Advisor to the Secretary and Chief Technology Officer Dr. Peter Levin; and Deputy National Service Director for Disabled American Veterans Garry Augustine was appointed to pick the best of the best.

Ten Innovation Initiative winners were selected by the judges. Here’s a look at the winning submissions.

■ Employees of the Phoenix VA Regional Office submitted an initiative to work simple claims first. There are several types of disability claims that are fairly straightforward in the adjudicative requirements, such as

hearing loss and tinnitus, and once claimed should automatically establish eligibility for service-connected benefits. These benefits can be compensable or non-compensable, but in either case would establish eligibility for medical treatment for veterans through VA medical centers. By isolating specific types of claims, VA can work toward automating these claims and adjudicating them much quicker, in turn providing better service.

■ Employees of the VA Records Management Center in St. Louis suggested providing regional offices with digital images of claims-related records held in VA's centralized storage facility as well as those records located at the VA Liaison Office at the National Personnel Records Center. These records, which are required to process claims, would be immediately available to the Veterans Benefits Administration's 57 regional offices and centers—eliminating the wait for transfer and shipping of paper copies.

■ Rating Veterans Service Representative Jeff Myers of the San Diego VA Regional Office submitted the idea to develop an "SMC Calculator"—a computer application to calculate entitlement to additional benefits payable to veterans with the most serious injuries. SMC, or Special Monthly Compensation, is a special allowance for certain severe disabilities that's paid in addition to the basic rate. The application will allow difficult cases to be rated faster with increased accuracy and consistency. The current process is manual and involves lengthy and multiple regulations as well as reviews and signatures to move forward.

■ Pre-Determination Team Coach Maria Barajas of the San Diego VA Regional Office submitted the idea to customize the Modern Award Processing-Development (MAP-D) database to facilitate communication between call center agents, veterans service representatives and veterans. MAP-D contains records for claims cases and was developed to reduce the amount of manual data entry required

and potential input errors.

■ VA Central Office and the St. Paul (Minn.) Pension Management Center submitted an idea to implement rules-based processing for VA pension programs and other benefits. Andrew Graf's idea would streamline the processing of dependency compensation and pension benefits through the implementation of a rules-based system modeled after technology used to develop tax software programs. His idea lays the foundation for further implementation of rules-based technology to be applied to compensation claims for increased evaluations and has the potential to allow for claims to be completed outside the current people-centric system.

■ Veterans Service Representative Ben Rogers, of the Hartford (Conn.) VA Regional Office, suggested creating an interactive chat application that would allow veterans to engage in an online dialogue with VA employees about disability compensation benefits. The Veterans Interactive Online Assistant, or VIOLA, would help to: inform veterans during the application process about what is needed to process their claim; reduce the number of days it takes to complete a claim by empowering veterans to have an active role in providing VA the exact information needed to process their claim more efficiently; increase transparency between VA and veterans by giving veterans a personal and tailored approach to the claims process; and provide veterans with general information on VA benefits and services.

■ Employees of the Albuquerque (N.M.) VA Regional Office submitted an idea to revise the front-end claims development process to include a specialized interview with the veteran by phone or in person, a letter summarizing the interview, and an informational DVD. This approach is aimed at increasing veterans' understanding of the claims process, resulting in better service and improved timeliness. The initiative differs from

telephone development currently used by some VA regional offices in that it mandates a philosophical change of development procedures where public contact is initiated by VA and is consistent at all offices.

■ Employees of the Atlanta VA Regional Office submitted an idea called Rapid Evaluation of Veterans' Claims. In this scenario, veterans may choose to have their claims for increased evaluations of service-connected conditions rated based solely on the information the veterans provide in addition to any electronic records from VA medical centers. In effect, the veterans waive the VA examination process because they understand the information needed to be granted the benefit they seek and have submitted that information. The Atlanta VARO will process REV claims within 30 days of receipt, thereby providing more timely service to veterans.

■ Assistant Veterans Service Center Manager Jack Hudson of the Pittsburgh VA Regional Office submitted the idea to lessen the need for VA medical examinations by providing veterans with standardized medical questionnaires to be completed by their private physicians. Veterans could use these medical questionnaires as an alternative to waiting to get a full assessment from a VA physician before their claims move forward. The idea would also allow more time for VA doctors to treat patients. In western Pennsylvania, VA performs about 7,000 exams for disability claims annually.

■ Veterans Service Representative Todd Bonn of the Togus (Maine) VA Regional Office suggested aligning employee performance standards with VA goals. Specifically, when veterans service representatives and rating veterans service representatives are working toward making their production-based performance standards, their actions will reduce claims processing times and the claims backlog. [VA](#)

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By Gary Hicks