## Chapter 1. Structure of the Veterans Service Center (VSC)

#### 1. Basic Components of the Veterans Benefits Administration’s (VBA’s) Claim-Processing Model for VSCs

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| a. Basic Components of VBA’s Claims-Processing Model for VSCs | This chapter describes the claim-processing model that the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) has implemented in each of its Veterans Service Centers (VSCs). The basic components of this model consist of* an intake processing center (IPC)
* cross-functional teams
* segmented, claims-processing lanes
* an Appeals Team, and
* a Public Contact Team (PCT).

Only the Office of Field Operations may grant a request for deviation from the model described in this chapter.***References***: For information about* IPCs, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart i, 1.2
* cross-functional teams, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart i, 1.4
* segmented, claim-processing lanes, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart i, 1.3
* Appeals Teams, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart i, 1.5
* PCT, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart i, 1.6, or
* the differences in the claim-processing models that VSCs and Pension Management Centers (PMCs) use, see M21-1, Part V, Subchapter iv, 1.3.
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#### 2. Intake Processing Centers (IPCs)

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| Introduction | This topic contains information about IPCs, including* composition of an IPC
* IPC roles and responsibilities, and
* mailroom responsibilities.
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| a. Composition of an IPC | Each IPC is composed of a Coach and one or more* Veterans Service Representatives (VSRs)
* Claims Assistants (CAs)
* File Clerks or Program Support Clerks (PSCs), and
* Mail Clerks (only if the VSC is responsible for mailroom operations).

***Note***: As a local option, VSCs may add to their IPC one or more* Assistant Coaches, and/or
* Program Support Assistants/Clerks.
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| **b. IPC Roles and Responsibilities** | The table below describes the roles and responsibilities in the IPC under the* Centralized Mail (CM) Process, and
* initial mail screening process.
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| **Position** | **CM User Role/Function** | **Responsibilities** |
| * Coach, and/or
* Assistant Coach
 | Super User (Supervisory) | * adapt local workload management plans to accommodate processing in
* CM, and
* initial mail screening.
* allocate staff to minimize uncontrolled mail inventory
* ensure the Board of Veterans’ Appeals (BVA) mail spreadsheet is consolidated weekly and e-mailed to BVA
* assists users in gaining access to both electronic mail processing portals
* CACI, and
* SMS
* monitor team performance and capitalize on process improvement opportunities
* utilize *Super User-level* access in the CACI & SMS CM portals to review the number of mail packets pending in employee work queues, and
* assess and appropriately assign/route all incoming mail inventory on a daily basis (all incoming queues including e-mails from National Call Centers).
* oversight of completion of records consolidation processing

***References***: For more information on * sending the weekly mail spreadsheet to BVA, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.E.5.d
* the CACI and SMS CM portals, see
* the [*SMS User Guide*](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/OBPI/CentralMail/VBADCSCMExceptionPortalUserManualv63.pdf)
* the [*CACI User Guide*](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/OBPI/CentralMail/VACMTUserGuide3_30_15_v2.pdf)
* the CM process, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.E.1
* the initial mail screening process, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.A.1
* consolidation of BIRLS and corporate records, see M21-1 Part III, Subpart ii, 4.E
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| * VSR, and/or
* an experienced Claims Assistant (CA)
 | Super User (Intake) | * using the first-in-first-out (FIFO) workload strategy, route incoming mail on a daily basis to basic users for processing
* review and process mail that cannot be processed by a basic user due to complexity, and
* perform daily checks of all incoming queues and the PCT corporate e-mail box to ensure timely processing of all incoming mail.

***Important***: Although regional offices (ROs) are assigned a primary portal, routing of all incoming mail must occur daily in both the SMS and CACI mail portals.***Reference***: For more information on * FIFO workload strategy, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.E.1.c
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| CA | Basic User (Control and Mail) | * Establish claims and generate automated Standard 5103 notice
* Review and process exceptions (including failures to upload)
* Control incoming Notices of Disagreement (NODs) or appeals-related evidence
* Control incoming *VA Form 21-0966, Intent to File a Claim for Compensation and/or Pension, or Survivors Pension and/or DIC* and update electronic records.
* Control evidence mail
* Control and update electronic records (i.e. changes of address, *VA Form 21-22*, *Appointment of Veterans Service Organization as Claimant’s Representative* updates, birth certificates, etc.)
* Request STRs, verify service, except for Reservist and National Guard Veterans

***References***: For more information on* establishing claims, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 3.D.1
* controlling incoming NODs and appeals related evidence, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 3.E.1
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| * PSC
* File Clerk, or
* CA
 | CM access optional | Prepares and ships paper claims folders to the scanning vendor according to current Veterans Claim Intake Program (VCIP) proceduresIf claims are processed in paper or paper claims folders are being maintained at the RO, the PSC/CA/file clerk may have the following additional responsibilities* handle requests for the permanent or temporary transfer of claims folders out of the VSC (This includes claims folders transferred to other ROs in connection with work-brokering arrangements)
* update the Control of Veterans Records System (COVERS) to reflect the
* transfer of claims folders to locations outside of the RO, and
* receipt of claims folders transferred into the VSC
* consolidate claims folders that belong to the same Veteran
* repair damaged claims folders
* create additional volumes of a claims folder when the size of the claims folder or one of its volumes exceeds two and one-half inches
* conduct searches for claims folders
* drop-file mail into claims folders
* check the sequencing of claims folders in the file bank
* re-file claims folders that are returned to the file bank
* ship claims folders to off-site locations, and
* retire and relocate claims folders.
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| ***References***: For more information on * handling consolidation of duplicate BIRLS and corporate records, see M21-1 Part III, Subpart ii, 4.E
* Processing mail electronically in the CM portal, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.E.1, and
* VCIP shipping procedures, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.F.1.
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| c. Mailroom Responsibilities | If the VSC is responsible for an RO’s mailroom operations, Mail Clerks within the IPC are responsible for* retrieving, opening, and date-stamping incoming mail
* sorting incoming mail by the division in the RO to which the mail is addressed
* picking up mail from and delivering mail to divisions with the RO
* sorting and processing outgoing mail, and
* maintaining mail delivery and postal logs.

***Important***: Under the CM process * all compensation and pension related mail is shipped to the scanning vendor for conversion, regardless of jurisdiction and
* all non-compensation or pension mail is routed to the appropriate business line location.

***References***: For more information about * date-stamping incoming mail, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.C.1.
* receipt, separation and routing of physical mail under the Centralized mail process, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.E.2.
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**3. Segmented, Claim-Processing Lanes**

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| a. Segmented, Claim-Processing Lanes | Upon receipt of a claim for VA benefits, the IPC is responsible for assigning claims to one of several claim-processing lanes. Each lane is composed of one or more cross-functional teams, which are described in M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.4.The table below contains a description of each lane and the types of issues/claims the teams within them process: |

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| Lane Title | Responsibilities |
| Express | Processes *one-* or *two-*issueclaims that require a rating decision.***Note***: Claims for hearing loss and tinnitus shall be considered as one issue when determining lane assignments.***Exclusions***:* claims that involve disability compensation for diabetes
* claims for a total disability rating based on individual unemployability (IU), and/or
* claims that fall under the jurisdiction of the Special Operations Lane.
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| Core | Process* claims with three or more issues that require a rating decision
* claims that involve disability compensation for diabetes, and
* claims for a total disability rating based on IU.

***Exclusions***: claims that fall under the jurisdiction of the Special Operations Lane. |
| Special Operations | Process claims* from Veterans who
* are former prisoners of war (FPOW)
* are homeless, or
* were seriously or very seriously injured during service (SI/VSI)
* that involve
* clear and unmistakable error
* [38 U.S.C. 1151](http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/38/1151)
* special monthly compensation
* military sexual trauma
* amyotrophic lateral sclerosis
* Parkinson’s disease
* multiple sclerosis, or
* traumatic brain injury, or
* affected by the *Nehmer v. United States Veterans Administration* class action suit.
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| Non-Rating | * Handle due process actions that do not involve a rating decision.
* Process
* grants of special adaptive housing, special housing adaptation, and automobile adaptive equipment
* claims for additional compensation or pension for dependents that do not require a rating decision , and
* 800 series work items that do not require a rating decision
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| Appeals  | Process* appeals of decisions that a VSC makes, and
* claims involving contentions that
* require a rating decision, ***and***
* are intertwined with issues currently on appeal.
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| ***Notes***:* A graphic representation of lane assignments is available in M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 3.D.7.
* Employees that VSC management assigned as coordinators over FPOWs, homeless Veterans, or SI/VSI Veterans should also serve on the team(s) working in the Special Operations Lane.
* Claims that require priority processing should ***not*** be assigned to the Special Operations Lane ***unless*** they meet the criteria for processing in that lane. It is the responsibility of teams working in the other lanes to which these claims are assigned to ensure they are processed expeditiously.
* Smaller VSCs (with 100 or fewer full-time employees) may combine lanes when the inventory of claims for individual lanes does not justify keeping them separate.
* ROs have the ability to align segmented lane functions based upon
* operational needs
* established workload management plans, and
* guidance from the Office of Field Operations (OFO).
* Gulf War claims are no longer processed through the Special Operations lane. These claims are processed across all lanes with no specialty based on the contentions claimed.

***References***: For more information on * segmented claims processing lanes, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 3.D.6, and
* priority processing, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.D.1.
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**4. Cross-Functional Teams**

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| Introduction | This topic contains information about cross-functional teams, including * composition of cross-functional teams
* responsibilities of cross-functional teams
* assigning and screening of claims
* handling mail that the IPC assigned to the wrong lane
* actions to take when the IPC fails to properly update VBA electronic systems
* duties of VSRs
* duties of Rating Veterans Service Representatives (RVSRs), and
* determining whether a deferred rating decision is necessary*.*
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| a. Composition of Cross-Functional Teams | Each cross-functional team is composed of* a Coach, and
* one or more
* VSRs that have been cross-trained in both claim development and award promulgation
* Senior VSRs (SVSRs), GS-12 VSRs and/or certified, GS-11 VSRs, and
* Rating Veterans Service Representatives (RVSRs).

***Note***: As a local option, VSCs may add to a team one or more* CAs, and/or
* Assistant Coaches.
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| b. Responsibilities of Cross-Functional Teams | Cross-functional teams are responsible for * assigning incoming claims to individuals
* initial and supplemental claim development
* preparation of a rating decision, if necessary
* award promulgation, and
* award authorization.
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| c. Assigning and Screening of Claims  | The coach or assistant coach assigns claims to individuals by* assigning terminal digit responsibilities
* auto assigning claims to work queues in VBMS, and/or
* manually assigning claims to work queues.

***Notes***: * When screening claims manually (not auto-assigning) for assignment, the coach/assistant coach reviews Veterans Service Network (VETSNET) Operations Reports (VOR) or other reports and screens the claims status to determine proper assignment.
* If a VSR or RVSR identifies or discovers
* mail that the IPC assigned to the wrong lane, he/she must take the actions described in M21-1, Part III, Subpart i.1.4.d.
* the IPC did not make the updates to electronic systems, or if the updates the IPC made were incorrect, he/she must take the actions described in M21-1, Part III, Subpart i, 1.4.e.
* Coaches or assistant coaches also
* identify (through VOR) claims for which all evidence has been received but the status is ***not*** RFD, and
* assign whatever action is necessary to move such claims to the next step in the claims process.

***References***: For more information on * VOR, see the [Data and Information Services web page](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/bl/20/opai/pai/wkld/2010/files/dis.htm), and
* workload management in VBMS, see the
* [VBMS Job Instruction Sheet – Assign Claim - Supervisor](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VBMS/Resources_Job_Instruction_Sheets.asp)
* [VBMS Job Instruction Sheet – Assign Claim Priority](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VBMS/Resources_Job_Instruction_Sheets.asp)
* [VBMS Job Instruction Sheet – Supervisor: Configuring Segmented Lanes](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VBMS/Resources_Job_Instruction_Sheets.asp)
* [VBMS Job Instruction Sheet – Supervisor: Reassigning Segmented Lanes](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VBMS/Resources_Job_Instruction_Sheets.asp)
* [VBMS Job Instruction Sheet – Workload Management](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VBMS/Resources_Job_Instruction_Sheets.asp), and
* [VBMS Coaches Corner](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VBMS/coaches_corner.asp) site.
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| d. Handling Mail That the IPC Assigned to the Wrong Lane | If a VSR or RVSR identifies mail that the IPC assigned to the wrong lane, he/she must take the actions described in the table below: |

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| Step | Action |
| 1 | Determine the correct lane assignment. |
| 2 | Revise the special issue that was added to the first contention to reflect the correct lane assignment.***References***: For information about updating special issues in* Modern Award Processing – Development (MAP-D), see the [*MAP-D User’s Guide*](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VetsNet/Claims_Docs/webhelp/Claim_Development1.htm), or
* VBMS, see the
* the [*VBMS User Guide*](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VBMS/Resources_Technical_Information.asp), and
* the [VBMS Job Aid - Adding Special Issues in VBMS](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VBMS/Resources_Job_Aids.asp).
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| 3 | Is the VSC processing the mail in a paperless environment?* If *yes*, proceed no further.
* If *no*, proceed to the next step.
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| 4 | Deliver the mail/claims folder to the appropriate lane.***Important***: If the mail is attached to a claims folder, update COVERs to reflect movement of the claims folder to the appropriate lane. |

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| e. Actions to Take When the IPC Fails to Properly Update VBA Electronic Systems | If a VSR or RVSR discovers the IPC did not make the updates for which it is responsible in VBA electronic systems, or if the updates the IPC made were incorrect, the VSR or RVSR must make the correction at the time the error is identified.***Example***: The IPC fails to* place a claim under EP control
* assign the correct EP to a claim, or
* update MAP-D or VBMS to reflect
* all contentions raised by a claimant, and/or
* all evidence received in connection with a claim.
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| f. Duties of VSRs | The duties of a VSR include:* determining what evidence is necessary to decide a claim
* undertaking development action to obtaining necessary evidence
* ensuring VBA electronic systems accurately reflect
* suspense dates and reasons
* contentions associated with a claim
* development undertaken in connection with a claim
* evidence received in connection with a claim, and
* claim status
* determining when a claim is ready for a decision
* notifying beneficiaries of proposed adverse actions
* deciding claims/issues that do *not* require a rating decision
* entering award data into VBA electronic systems, and
* notifying claimants of decisions on their claims.

***Notes***:* SVSRs and certified GS-11 VSRs are responsible for authorizing/approving award actions.
* Journey-level VSRs who have completed training specified by Central Office (CO) may prepare basic or straightforward medical opinion requests without RVSR or DRO review.

***References***: For information about* claim development, see
* M21-1, Part III, Subpart iii, and
* M21-1, Part IV, Subpart ii, Chapter 1
* claim development in VBMS, see the
* [VBMS Job Instruction Sheet - Initial Claim Development](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VBMS/Resources_Job_Instruction_Sheets.asp), and
* [VBMS Job Instruction Sheet - Supplemental Claim Development](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VBMS/Resources_Job_Instruction_Sheets.asp).
* who may request a medical opinion, see
* M21-1, Part III, Subpart iv, 3.A.1.a, and
* M21-1, Part III, Subpart iv, 3.A.9.a
* entering award data in
* VETSNET, see the [*Awards User Guide*](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VetsNet/Awards_Docs/Awards%20User%20Guide.pdf), or
* VBMS, see the [*VBMS User Guide*](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VBMS/Resources_Technical_Information.asp)
* deciding claims/issues that do not require a rating decision, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart v
* issuing notice of a proposed adverse action, see
* M21-1, Part I, 2.B, and
* M21-1, Part IV, Subpart ii, 3.A, or
* issuing decision notification, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart v, 2.B.
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| g. Duties of RVSRs | The duties of an RVSR include* preparing complex medical opinion requests
* determining whether medical evidence received in connection with a claim justifies the granting of entitlement to VA benefits, and
* preparing rating decisions that discuss the evidence reviewed and the decision narrative behind a decision to grant or deny entitlement.

***References***: For information about* who may request a medical opinion, see
* M21-1, Part III, Subpart iv, 3.A.1.a, and
* M21-1, Part III, Subpart iv, 3.A.9.a
* analyzing medical evidence to determine entitlement to VA benefits and preparing rating decisions, see
* M21-1, Part IV, Subpart ii, 2, and
* M21-1, Part III, Subpart iv, or
* preparing rating decisions in VBMS, see the [*VBMS User Guide - Rating*](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VBMS/Resources_Technical_Information.asp).
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| h. Determining Whether a Deferred Rating Decision Is Necessary | When an RVSR determines additional development is required in order to decide a claim, he/she should collaborate with a VSR on his/her team to determine how long it will take to complete the development.* If the VSR ***cannot*** complete the development action quickly, the RVSR must
* prepare a deferred rating decision, and
* return the claim to the VSR.
* If the VSR ***can*** complete the development action quickly, the VSR must take the action as soon as possible and notify the RVSR when it is complete.

***Examples***:* Development actions that VSRs can typically complete quickly include:
* obtaining clarification from a VA doctor or contract examiner on the details of a physical examination report, and
* obtaining a waiver from a claimant of the requirements [38 U.S.C. Section 5103](http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/html/uscode38/usc_sec_38_00005103----000-.html) places on VA.
* Development actions that warrant the preparation of a deferred rating decision because they cannot be completed quickly include:
* requesting a VA examination, and
* initial development of an additional contention that an RVSR identifies upon his/her review of a claim that is otherwise ready for a decision.
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#### 5. Appeals Team

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| Introduction | This topic contains general information about the Appeals Team, including * function and responsibilities of the Appeals Team
* composition of the Appeals Team
* additional duties of VSRs on an Appeals Team
* duties of DROs, and
* determining whether a deferred rating decision is necessary.
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| a. Function and Responsibilities of the Appeals Team | The primary function of the Appeals Team is the expeditious processing of appeals and remands that do *not* fall under the jurisdiction of the Appeals Management Center (AMC)*.* Its responsibilities include:* establishing, monitoring, and updating appeals-tracking records in the Veterans Appeals Control and Locator System (VACOLS)
* making any necessary updates to all applicable VBA electronic systems developing and deciding issues on appeal and on remanded appeals
* promulgating any rating decisions stemming from appeals or remands
* authorizing award actions
* preparing and mailing decision notices to appellants, and
* promptly forwarding to BVA any communication from a claimant that constitutes or could be construed as a
* notice of appeal of a BVA decision, or
* motion for reconsideration of a BVA decision.
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| b. Composition of the Appeals Team | For the most part, the Appeals Team is a self-contained unit that is composed of essentially the same types of employees as a cross-functional team.Depending on the size of the VSC, an Appeals Team typically has* a Coach, and
* one or more
* VSRs that have been cross-trained in both claim development and award promulgation
* SVSRs and/or certified, GS-11 VSRs, and
* Decision Review Officers (DROs).

***Notes***: As a local option, VSCs may add to an Appeals Team one or more* CAs, and/or
* Assistant Coaches.

***References***: For more information about the duties of * VSRs and SVSRs, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart i, 1.4.f, or
* DROs, see M21-1, Part I, 5.C.2 .
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| c. Additional Duties of VSRs on an Appeals Team | In addition to the responsibilities described in M21-1, Part III, Subpart i.1.4.f, VSRs on an Appeals Team are also responsible for* notifying beneficiaries of proposed adverse appeals actions
* deciding appeals issues that do *not* require a rating decision, and
* notifying claimants of decisions on their appeals.

***Notes***: * SVSRs and certified GS-11 VSRs are responsible for authorizing/approving award actions.
* Appeals VSRs must update VBMS/MAP-D in addition to VACOLS.

***References***: For information about* entering award data in
* VETSNET, see the [*Awards User Guide*](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VetsNet/Awards_Docs/Awards%20User%20Guide.pdf), or
* VBMS, see the [*VBMS User Guide*](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VBMS/Resources_Technical_Information.asp)
* deciding issues that do not require a rating decision, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart v
* issuing notice of a proposed adverse action, see
* M21-1, Part I, 2.B, and
* M21-1, Part IV, Subpart ii, 3.A, or
* issuing decision notification, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart v, 2.B.
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| d. Duties of DROs | See M21-1, Part I, 5.C for information about* the duties of DROs, and
* the DRO review process.
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| e. Determining Whether a Deferred Rating Decision Is Necessary | When a DRO determines additional development is required in order to make a decision on an appealed issue, he/she should collaborate with a VSR on his/her team to determine how long it will take to complete the development.* If the VSR ***cannot*** complete the development action quickly, the DRO must prepare a deferred rating decision.
* If the VSR ***can*** complete the development action quickly, the VSR must take the action as soon as possible and notify the DRO when it is complete.

***Example***: For examples of the circumstances under which a deferred rating decision is and is not necessary, see M21-1III, Subpart i, 1.4.h. |

#### 6. Public Contact Team (PCT)

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| Introduction | This topic contains general information about the PCT, including* responsibilities of the PCT, and
* helping visitors with benefit-related issues.
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| a. Responsibilities of the PCT | The Public Contact Team (PCT) is primarily responsible for* meeting with individuals (typically claimants or beneficiaries) that visit an RO for the purpose of
* obtaining information about VA benefits, and/or
* requesting assistance in filing a claim
* receiving information/evidence that individuals hand-deliver to an RO, and
* responding to
* Veterans Assistance Inquiries (VAIs), and
* inquiries submitted through the Inquiry Routing and Information System (IRIS).

***Reference***: For more information about VAIs and IRIS, see M27-1, Part I, Chapter 6. |

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| b. Helping Visitors With Benefit-Related Issues | When an individual visits an RO for the purpose of receiving assistance in filing a claim or requesting an adjustment in a running award, a member of the PCT first meets with the individual in an area that ensures their privacy.Depending on the individual’s needs and the information/evidence the individual provides to the team member, the team member might take one or more of the following actions:* discuss with the individual the eligibility requirements for the benefit he/she is seeking
* assist the individual in completing the appropriate application(s)/form(s)
* advise the individual on any additional information/evidence the VSC requires to process his/her claim or adjust his/her award
* update the corporate record based on new/additional information the individual provides to the team member (such as an updated mailing address, direct deposit information, and/or corrections in date(s) of birth and Social Security number(s) (SSNs))
* date-stamp any documentation the individual submits to the RO, according to instructions in M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.C.1 , and/or
* route all documentation that requires action (other than updating the corporate record) to the VSC’s IPC or to the scanning vendor using designated fax lines.

***Notes***: * PCT employees or VSOs use designated facsimile (fax) lines to transmit documents directly to the scanning vendors.
* If a VA employee Veteran or their family member submits claim related documents, PCT will complete a Restricted Access Claims Center (RACC) fax cover sheet, attach it to the documents and fax the documents to the scanning vendor.

***References***: For more information on * faxing documents to the scanning vendors, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.E.3
* claims handled by RACCs, see
* M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 4.A.3, and
* M21-1. Part III, Subpart ii, 1.E.9.
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