## 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 section 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, claim-processing lanes * an Appeals Team, and * a Public Contact Team.   Only the Office of Field Operations may grant a request for deviation from the model described in this section.  ***References***: For information about   * IPCs, see [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart i, 1.2](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.i.1.2) * cross-functional teams, see [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart i, 1.4](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.i.1.4) * segmented, claim-processing lanes, see [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart i, 1.3](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.i.1.3) * Appeals Teams, see [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart i, 1.5](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.i.1.5) * Public Contact Teams, see [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart i, 1.6](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.i.1.6), or * the differences in the claim-processing models that VSCs and Pension Management Centers (PMCs) use, see [M21-1MR, Part V, Subchapter iv, 1.3](imi-internal:M21-1MRV.iv.1.3). |

#### 2. Intake Processing Centers (IPCs)

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| Introduction | This topic contains information about IPCs, including   * composition of an IPC * IPC responsibilities * mailroom responsibilities, and * description of the flow of mail into and out of an IPC. |

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| a. Composition of an IPC | Each IPC is composed of a Coach and one or more   * Intake Analysts (IAs) (certified GS-11 Veterans Service Representatives (VSRs) or GS-12 Senior VSRs (SVSRs)) * Claims Assistants (CAs) * File Clerks, 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 Responsibilities | The table below contains a list of tasks for which IPCs are responsible. It also identifies which employee, by position title, is responsible for performing the tasks. |

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| Position Title | Responsibilities |
| Intake Analyst | * take the actions described in stages 2, 3, and 4 of the process outlined in [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart i, 1.2.d](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.i.1.2.d) * maintain the Military File * maintain a log of mail the VSC receives that requires processing by a PMC and prepare the mail for shipment to the appropriate PMC at the end of each day * download and print claims the VSC receives through the Veterans Online Application (VONAPP) * manage the unassigned work queue in the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS) * monitor the Public Contact Team and Chapter 35 mailboxes (This includes printing out e-mails and introducing them into the process described in [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart i, 1.2.d](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.i.1.2.d).), and * pick up, date-stamp, and route incoming faxes to the appropriate VSC personnel.   ***Reference***: For more information about   * the Military File, see [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart ii, 4.H.25](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.ii.4.H.25), or * VBMS and management of the unassigned work queue, see the [*VBMS User Guide*](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VBMS/Resources_Technical_Information.asp). |

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| Position Title | Responsibilities |
| Claims Assistant | * take the actions described in [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart i, 1.2.d](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.i.1.2.d) that are the responsibility of Claims Assistants * handle requests for the permanent or temporary transfer of claims folders out of the VSC (This includes claims folders transferred to other regional offices (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 or electronic folders (eFolders) 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, and * prepare claims folders for shipment to designated vendors for conversion into an electronic format (scanning).   ***Reference***: For more information about   * brokering/transferring claims in VBMS, see the VBMS [job instruction sheet](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VBMS/Resources_Job_Instruction_Sheets.asp) titled *Broker Claim* * using COVERS, see the [*COVERS User Guide*](http://css.vba.va.gov/COVERS/) * transferring claims folders, see [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart ii, 5.E](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.ii.5.E) and [F](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.ii.5.F) * transferring jurisdiction over an eFolder in Virtual VA, see the [*Virtual VA User Guide*](http://virtualva.vba.va.gov/training/guides/virtualvauser.pdf) * folder maintenance, see [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart ii, 4.G](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.ii.4.G), or * shipping claims folders to scanning vendors, see the Transformation Initiatives and Pilots (TIP) sheet titled [*Veterans Claims Intake Program (VCIP)*](http://vbacodmoint1.vba.va.gov/bl/21/Transformation/docs/VCIP.doc). |

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| Position Title | Responsibilities |
| File Clerk | * take the actions described in Stage 15 of the process outlined in [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart i, 1.2.d](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.i.1.2.d) * conduct searches for claims folders * drop-file “drop 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.   ***Reference***: For more information on drop-filing mail, searching for claims folders, and checking the sequencing of claims folders, see [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart ii, 4.A](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.ii.4.A) and [B](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.ii.4.B). |

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| ***Note***: The IPC is also responsible for   * responding to Freedom of Information Act /Privacy Act requests the VSC receives, and * printing and responding to inquiries from the Medical Evaluation System Medical Services, which is a contractor that conducts physical examinations for VBA. |

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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.   ***Reference***: For more information about date-stamping incoming mail, see [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.C.10](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.ii.1.C.10). |

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| d. Description of the Flow of Mail Into and Out of an IPC | The table below contains a description of the flow of mail into and out of an IPC: |

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| Stage | Description |
| 1 | Each day, a Mail Clerk delivers mail that belongs to the VSC to an IA. |
| 2 | The IA reviews each piece of mail to determine   * which claim-processing lane is responsible for processing the mail * whether the mail must be placed under control in VBA electronic systems, and * whether the mail requires priority handling.   Important:   * Upon receipt of ***any*** appeal-related mail, to include the following, the IPC takes no action other than to route the mail directly to the Appeals Team: * notices of disagreement (NODs) * notices of appeal of a Board of Veterans Appeals (BVA) decision, and * motions for reconsideration of a BVA decision. * Upon receipt of mail referring to a Veteran for whom no corporate record or claims folder/eFolder exists, the IA follows the instructions in [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.B.8.b](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.ii.1.B.8.b) for handling “no-record mail.”   ***Reference***: [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart i, 1.3](file:///C:\Users\capktibb\AppData\Roaming\Microsoft\Word\Cross-Functional%20Teams%20SOP.doc) contains   * a description of the claim-processing lanes, and * the criteria for making lane assignments. |
| 3 | The IA attaches to the mail a paper flash of a specific color that identifies the claim-processing lane to which he/she assigned the mail for processing.  The table below lists the colors of the paper flashes the IA uses.   |  |  | | --- | --- | | If the mail will be processed by the ... | Then the IA uses a ... | | Express Lane | red-colored flash | | Special Operations Lane | yellow-colored flash | | Core Lane | light blue-colored flash | |
| 4 | The IA routes the mail to a CA. |

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| Stage | Description |
| 5 | The CA takes the actions described in ***steps 2 through 6*** of the procedure outlined in [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.B.6.b](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.ii.1.B.6.b), to include placing the mail under end product (EP) control if the IA directed him/her to do so.  ***Reference***: For information about placing mail under control in VBMS, see the VBMS [job instruction sheet](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VBMS/Resources_Job_Instruction_Sheets.asp) titled *Claim Establishment*. |

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| Stage | Description |
| 6 | The CA takes the actions described in the table below:   |  |  | | --- | --- | | If ... | Then the CA ... | | * the VSC does ***not*** require the corresponding claims folder to process the mail, or * the VSC has custody of or access to the corresponding claims folder/eFolder | continues processing the mail according to the instructions in Stage 7. | | * the mail requires action by a different RO * the other RO will need the corresponding claims folder to process the mail, and * the VSC has custody of the claims folder | * requests the claims folder from the file bank * attaches the mail to the claims folder when it arrives * transfers the claims folder to the other RO, and * takes no further action. (The process ends here.) | | the mail requires action by a different RO and   * the other RO does ***not*** need the corresponding claims folder to process the mail, or * the VSC does ***not*** have custody of the claims folder | * routes the mail to the other RO, and * takes no further action. (The process ends here.) | | * the action the mail requires falls under the jurisdiction of the VSC * the VSC cannot process the mail without a claims folder, and * the claims folder is in the custody of another RO | * uses COVERS to request transfer of the claims folder from the other RO * stores the corresponding mail in a designated cabinet, and * takes no further action until the claims folder arrives. |     ***References***: For more information about   * claim jurisdiction and transferring claims folders into and out of an RO, see [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart ii, Chapter 5](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.ii.5), or * transferring jurisdiction over eFolders in * Virtual VA, see the [*Virtual VA User Guide*](http://virtualva.vba.va.gov/training/guides/virtualvauser.pdf), or * VBMS, see the VBMS [job instruction sheet](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VBMS/Resources_Job_Instruction_Sheets.asp) titled *Broker Claim*. |

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| Stage | Description |
| 7 | If the mail represents a claim for VA benefits or correspondence related to a pending claim, the process continues with the activities described in the next stage. Otherwise, the process resumes with the activity described in Stage 11. |
| 8 | The CA takes the actions described in ***steps 7 and 10*** of the procedure outlined in [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.B.6.b](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.ii.1.B.6.b). |
| 9 | If the mail represents an ***original*** claim for benefits, the process continues with the activities described in the next stage. Otherwise, the process resumes with the activity described in Stage 11. |
| 10 | The CA   * requests service treatment records (STRs) ***except*** the STRs of members of the Reserve or National Guard * verifies service, and * requests private medical records (only when a DOMA vendor exists).   ***Reference***: For information about   * requesting STRs, see [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart iii, 2.B.12](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.iii.2.B.12), or * using a DOMA vendor to request private medical records, see the [*Private Medical Record (PMR) Pilot Fact Sheet*](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/bl/21/Systems/Docs/PMRFactSheetPt2.doc). |
| 11 | If the VSC is processing or will process the mail in a ***paperless environment***, the process continues with activities described in the next stage. Otherwise, the process resumes with the activity described in Stage 13. |
| 12 | The CA takes the actions described in the procedure outlined in M21-[MR, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.B.6.b](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.ii.1.B.6.b), ***starting with Step 12***. (The process ends here.) |
| 13 | If review of the claims folder is necessary in order to process the mail, the process continues with the activity described in the next stage. Otherwise, the process resumes with the activity described in Stage 16.  ***Notes***: VSCs may process some types of mail without reviewing the corresponding claims folder. Examples of this include many of the claims VSCs receive for additional benefits for dependents. |
| 14 | The CA routes the mail to the file bank. |

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| Stage | Description |
| 15 | A File Clerk   * attaches the mail to the appropriate claims folder, and * delivers the claims folder to the appropriate team by lane assignment, and * updates COVERS to reflect the new location of the claims folder. (The process ends here.)   ***Note***: If the claims folder has been charged out of the file bank by a division within the RO, the File Clerk follows the instructions in [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart ii, 4.B.8](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.ii.4.B.8) and [9](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.ii.4.B.9). |
| 16 | The CA routes the mail to the claim-processing lane that the IA chose in Stage 2. |

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| ***Important***:   * Once each day, CAs must review * mail that is awaiting association with a claims folder that the VSC has not yet located (also known as “search mail”), and * mail that is awaiting transfer of the corresponding claims folder to the VSC from another office. (The purpose of this review is to determine whether the claims folder has arrived from the other RO.) * IPCs must review all incoming mail on at least a daily basis and complete the processing described in this topic within seven days. * Each piece of mail that leaves the IPC should bear an annotation that shows * the pending EP * a description of any action the IPC took, including the * date of the action, and * initials of the employee that took the action, and * routing instructions.   ***Reference***: For more information about mail management within a VSC, see [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.B](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.ii.1.B.). |

#### 3. Segmented, Claim-Processing Lanes

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| a. Segmented, Claim-Processing Lanes | Upon receipt of a claim for VA benefits, an IA within a VSC’s IPC is responsible for assigning the claim to one of several claim-processing lanes. Each lane is composed of one or more cross-functional teams, which are described in [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart i, 1.4](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.i.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 | Process   * one- or two-issue claims that require a rating decision, and * fully-developed claims (FDCs), *regardless* of the number of issues.   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. |
| 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. |

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| Lane Title | Responsibilities |
| 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. |
| 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, and * claims for additional compensation or pension for dependents that do not require a rating decision. |

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| Lane Title | Responsibilities |
| 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***:   * Employees that VSC management has assigned as coordinators over FPOWs, homeless Veterans, or SI/VSI Veterans should also serve on the team(s) working in the Special Operations Lane. * IAs should ***not*** assign claims that require priority handling, such as FDCs or Quick Pay Disability (QPD) claims, 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. |

#### 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 * duties of comprehensive screeners * 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) * determining whether a deferred rating decision is necessary, and * *Action Required* form. |

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| a. Composition of Cross-Functional Teams | Each cross-functional team is composed of   * a Coach * one or more VSRs that have been designated as the team’s Comprehensive Screener(s), 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 * Rating Veterans Service Representatives (RVSRs).   Notes:   * As a local option, VSCs may add to a team one or more * Claims Assistants, and/or * Assistant Coaches. * Smaller VSCs (with 100 or fewer full-time employees) may assign one Comprehensive Screener to serve multiple teams. |

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| b. Responsibilities of Cross-Functional Teams | Cross-functional teams are responsible for   * screening incoming claims * initial and supplemental claim development * preparation of a rating decision, if necessary * award promulgation, and * award authorization. |

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| c. Duties of Comprehensive Screeners | A Comprehensive Screener acts as the first point of contact for all mail an IPC routes to a cross-functional team that is ready for immediate action. The Comprehensive Screener ensures the IPC   * routed the mail to the appropriate lane, and * assigned the correct EP when the IPC placed the mail under control in VBA electronic systems.   If the mail represents a claim for VA benefits or is related to a pending claim, the Comprehensive Screener also   * ensures the IPC updated VBA electronic systems to reflect * all contentions associated with the claim, and * all evidence the VSC has received in connection with the claim, and * takes the action(s) described in the table below: |

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| Step | Action |
| 1 | Determine whether the mail requires action by a VSR.  Examples:   * initial development * supplemental development, or * follow up. |
| 2 | Does the mail require action by a VSR?   * If *yes*, proceed to the next step. * If *no*, proceed to Step 6. |

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| Step | Action |
| 3 | Complete the *Action Required* form shown in [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart i, 1.4.i](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.i.1.4.i), detailing what action(s) the VSR must take to make the claim ready for a decision.  ***Note***: If it would take the Comprehensive Screener as much or more time to complete the form as it would to take the action he/she prescribes, the Comprehensive Screener should take the action him/herself ***without*** completing the form. |
| 4 | Attach the *Action Required* form to the mail. |
| 5 | Follow the instructions in the table below.   |  |  | | --- | --- | | If the VSC … | Then … | | is processing the mail in a paperless environment | * assign the corresponding work item to one of the team’s VSRs, and * proceed no further. | | is ***not*** processing the mail in a paperless environment | * deliver the mail to one of the team’s VSRs, and * proceed no further.   ***Note***: If the mail is attached to a claims folder, the Comprehensive Screener must also update COVERS to reflect delivery of the claims folder to the VSR. | |
| 6 | Is all of the evidence/documentation that is required to make a decision of record?   * If *yes*, proceed to the next step. * If *no*, proceed to Step 10. |
| 7 | Update VBA electronic systems to reflect that the corresponding claim is ready for a decision (RFD). |

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| Step | Action |
| 8 | Follow the instructions in the table below.   |  |  | | --- | --- | | If the VSC … | Then … | | is processing the mail in a paperless environment | * assign the corresponding work item to the appropriate decision-maker (an RVSR if a rating decision is required; a VSR if no rating decision is required), and * proceed no further. | | is ***not*** processing the mail in a paperless environment | * deliver the mail to the appropriate decision-maker, and * proceed no further.   ***Note***: If the mail is attached to a claims folder, the Comprehensive Screener must also   * file down the mail in the claims folder, and * update COVERS to reflect delivery of the claims folder to the VSR or RVSR. | |
| 9 | * Enter the following into an Excel spreadsheet titled *Ready for Decision*: * corresponding claim number * name of the VSR or RVSR to whom the Comprehensive Screener delivered the mail, and * date the Comprehensive Screener determined the claim was ready for a decision. * Proceed no further.   ***Note***: The Comprehensive Screener must email the *Ready for Decision* spreadsheet to his/her Coach before the end of each workday. |

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| Step | Action |
| 10 | Is the mail attached to a claims folder?   * If *yes*, * file down the mail in the claims folder * return the claims folder to the file room, and * update COVERs to reflect the new location of the claims folder. * If *no*, send the mail to the file room to be drop-filed in the corresponding claims folder. |

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| ***Notes***:   * Comprehensive Screeners must complete the actions described in this block within one day of receipt of mail from the IPC. * If a Comprehensive Screener identifies mail that the IPC assigned to the wrong lane, he/she must take the actions described in [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart i, 1.4.d](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.i.1.4.d). * If a Comprehensive Screener discovers the IPC did not make the updates for which it is responsible to VBA electronic systems, or if the updates the IPC made were incorrect, the Comprehensive Screener must take the actions described in [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart i, 1.4.e](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.i.1.4.e). * Comprehensive Screeners are also responsible for * identifying (through Veterans Service Network (VETSNET) Operations Reports (VORs)) claims for which all evidence has been received but the status of which are ***not*** RFD, and * taking whatever action is necessary to move such claims to the next step in the claims process.   ***Reference***: For more information about VOR, see the [Data and Information Services web page](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/bl/20/opai/pai/wkld/2010/files/dis.htm). |

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| d. Handling Mail That the IPC Assigned to the Wrong Lane | If a Comprehensive Screener 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](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VBMS/Resources_Job_Aids.asp) titled *Adding Special Issues in VBMS*. |
| 3 | Enter the following into the Excel spreadsheet titled *Claim Transfer Log*:   * date of review of the mail * end product the IPC assigned to the mail * corresponding claim number * title of the lane to which the IPC erroneously assigned the mail * reason for referral of the mail to a different lane * title of the lane to which the IPC *should have* assigned the mail, and * Comprehensive Screener’s name. |
| 4 | Is the VSC processing the mail in a paperless environment?   * If *yes*, proceed no further. * If *no*, proceed to the next step. |
| 5 | Deliver the mail 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 Comprehensive Screener discovers the IPC did not make the updates for which it is responsible to VBA electronic systems, or if the updates the IPC made were incorrect, the Comprehensive Screener must   * make the corrections him/herself, or * return the mail to the IPC for corrective action.   ***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.   SVSRs and certified GS-11 VSRs are responsible for authorizing/approving award actions.  ***References***: For information about   * claim development, see * [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart iii](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.iii), and * [M21-1MR, Part IV, Subpart ii, Chapter 1](imi-internal:M21-1MRIV.ii.1) * claim development in VBMS, see the [job instruction sheets](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VBMS/Resources_Job_Instruction_Sheets.asp) titled * *Initial Claim Development*, and * *Supplemental Claim Development* * 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 [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart v](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.v) * issuing notice of a proposed adverse action, see * [M21-1MR, Part I, 2.B](imi-internal:M21-1MRI.2.B), and * [M21-1MR, Part IV, Subpart ii, 3.A](imi-internal:M21-1MRIV.ii.3.A), or * issuing decision notification, see [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart v, 2.B](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.v.2.B). |

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| g. Duties of RVSRs | The duties of an RVSR include   * 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 reasons and bases behind a decision to grant or deny entitlement.   ***References***: For information about   * analyzing medical evidence to determine entitlement to VA benefits and preparing rating decisions, see * [M21-1MR, Part IV](imi-internal:M21-1MRIV), and * [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart iv](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.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 * refer it to his/her team’s Comprehensive Screener for distribution to one of the team’s VSRs. * 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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| i. Action Required Form | The image below represents a blank *Action Required* form, which Comprehensive Screeners use to direct the work of their teams’ VSR.  Blank Action Required Form, which Comprehensive Screeners use to direct the work of their teams’ Veterans Service Representatives |

#### 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 * processing appeal-related mail * additional duties of VSRs on an Appeals Team * duties of DROs, and * determining whether a deferred rating decision is necessary. |

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| Change Date | July 15, 2014 |

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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) * developing and deciding issues on appeal and on remanded appeals * promulgating any rating decisions stemming from appeals or remands * authorizing grants or denials of entitlement * 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 [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart i, 1.4.f](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.i.1.4.f), or * DROs, see [M21-1MR, Part I, 5.C.11.b](imi-internal:M21-1MRI.5.C.11.b). |

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| c. Processing Appeal-Related Mail | The table below describes how VSCs process appeal-related mail. |

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| Stage | Description |
| 1 | The VSC’s IPC delivers the mail to the Appeals Team. |
| 2 | A CA or VSR on the Appeals Team reviews the mail to determine   * whether the mail * represents a new NOD, or * is related to an appeal that is or was pending at an RO or BVA, and * whether the appellant lives within the geographical jurisdiction of another RO. |

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| Stage | Description |
| 3 | * If the mail constitutes or could be construed as one of the following, the process ends *after* the Appeals Team takes the actions described in [M21-1MR, Part I, 5.G.33.d](imi-internal:M21-1MRI.5.G.33.d): * notice of appeal of a BVA decision, or * motion for reconsideration of a BVA decision. * If the mail is related to an appeal that is currently pending, the process continues with the activity described in the next stage. * If the mail represents a new NOD, * the CA or VSR establishes a corresponding record in VACOLS, and * the process continues with the activity described in the next stage.   Important:   * If the NOD will be processed in a paperless environment in * VBMS, the Claims Assistant or VSR must select the *VBMS Appeal* checkbox in the SPECIAL INTEREST box on the DISPATCH tab in VACOLS, or * Virtual VA, the Claims Assistant or VSR must select the *Virtual VA Appeal* checkbox in the SPECIAL INTEREST box on the DISPATCH tab in VACOLS. * If the NOD will be processed in VBMS, the Claims Assistant or VSR should ***never*** select the *Virtual VA Appeal* checkbox, even though the appellant has an eFolder in Virtual VA.   ***References***: For information about using VACOLS, see the [*VACOLS User’s Guide*](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/bl/21/publicat/Users/Index.htm#bmv). |

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| Stage | Description |
| 4 | * If the appellant resides within the geographical jurisdiction of another RO, * the CA or VSR routes the mail (and corresponding claims folder, if necessary) to the RO of jurisdiction, and * the process ends here. * If the appellant resides within the geographical jurisdiction of the RO that received the mail, the process continues with the activity described in the next stage.   ***References***: For more information about   * transferring claims folders to another RO, see [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart ii, 5.E.18](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.ii.5.E.18), or * transferring jurisdiction over eFolders in * Virtual VA, see the [*Virtual VA User Guide*](http://virtualva.vba.va.gov/training/guides/virtualvauser.pdf), or * VBMS, see the VBMS [job instruction sheet](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VBMS/Resources_Job_Instruction_Sheets.asp) titled *Broker Claim*. |
| 5 | * If the mail is related to an appeal that is currently pending, the process continues with the activity described in the next stage. * If the mail represents a new NOD, * the CA or VSR establishes an EP 170, and * the process continues with the activity described in the next stage.   ***Reference***: For more information about establishing an EP in   * VBMS, see the [job instruction sheet](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VBMS/Resources_Job_Instruction_Sheets.asp) titled *Claim Establishment*, or * Share, see the [*Share User’s Guide*](http://css.vba.va.gov/SHARE/). |
| 6 | If the mail makes reference to contentions or includes evidence that has not yet been recorded in MAP-D or VBMS, the process continues with the activities described in the next stage. Otherwise, the process resumes with the activity described in Stage 9. |

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| Stage | Description |
| 7 | The CA or VSR follows the instructions in the table below.   |  |  | | --- | --- | | If ... | Then the Claims Assistant or VSR ... | | the VSC is processing or will process the appeal in VBMS | updates VBMS to reflect   * current contentions * special issues associated with the contentions, and * evidence VA has received. | | the VSC will ***not*** process the appeal in VBMS | updates MAP-D to reflect   * current contentions * special issues associated with the contentions, and * evidence VA has received in connection with the claim. |   ***References***: For information about   * making updates to MAP-D, see the [*MAP-D User’s Guide*](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VetsNet/Claims_Docs/webhelp/Claim_Development1.htm) * making updates to VBMS, see the [*VBMS User Guide*](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VBMS/Resources_Technical_Information.asp), or * adding special issues in VBMS, see the [job aid](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VBMS/Resources_Job_Aids.asp) titled *Adding Special Issues in VBMS*. |
| 8 | The CA or VSR annotates the mail in the lower, right-hand corner of the top page to show   * the update(s) made to MAP-D or VBMS * the initials of the employee that made the update(s), and * the current date. |
| 9 | If the VSC is processing or will process the mail in a paperless environment, the process continues with activities described in the next stage. Otherwise, the process resumes with the activity described in Stage 11. |

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| Stage | Description |
| 10 | The CA or VSR takes the actions described in the procedure outlined in M21-[MR, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.B.6.b](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.ii.1.B.6.b), ***starting with Step 12***. Afterward, the process resumes with the activity described in Stage 14. |
| 11 | If review of the claims folder is necessary in order to process the mail, the process continues with the activity described in the next stage. Otherwise, the process resumes with the activity described in Stage 14.  ***Notes***: VSCs may process some types of mail without reviewing the corresponding claims folder. Examples of this include many of the claims VSCs receive for additional benefits for dependents. |
| 12 | The CA or VSR routes the mail to the file bank. |
| 13 | A File Clerk   * attaches the mail to the appropriate claims folder * delivers the claims folder to the Appeals Team, and * updates COVERS to reflect the new location of the claims folder.     ***Note***: If the claims folder has been charged out of the file bank by a division within the RO, the File Clerk follows the instructions in [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart ii, 4.B.8](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.ii.4.B.8) and [9](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.ii.4.B.9). |
| 14 | A VSR on the Appeals Team reviews the mail to determine whether all of the evidence/documentation that is required to make a decision is of record.  ***Important***: If the VSC is processing the appeal in a paperless environment, the VSR must wait to review the mail until it is converted into an electronic format (scanned) and uploaded into the appropriate eFolder. |
| 15 | If all of the evidence/documentation that is required to make a decision is of record, the process continues with the activity described in the next stage. Otherwise, the process resumes with the activity described in Stage 20. |
| 16 | The VSR updates VBA electronic systems to reflect that the appeal is RFD. |

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| Stage | Description |
| 17 | If the VSC is processing the appeal in a paperless environment, the process continues with the activity described in the next stage. Otherwise, the process continues with the activity described in Stage 19. |
| 18 | The VSR assigns the corresponding work item to a DRO, and the process ends here.  ***References***: For information about assigning work items in   * VBMS, see the [*VBMS User Guide*](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VBMS/Resources_Technical_Information.asp), or * Virtual VA, see the [*Virtual VA User Guide*](http://virtualva.vba.va.gov/training/guides/virtualvauser.pdf). |
| 19 | The VSR delivers the mail to a DRO, and the process ends here.  ***Note***: If the mail is attached to a claims folder, the VSR must   * file down the mail in the claims folder before delivering it to the DRO, and * update COVERS to reflect the new location of the folder. |
| 20 | The VSR determines whether additional development is necessary in order to make the appeal ready for a decision. |
| 21 | * If additional development is ***not*** necessary, the process continues with the activity described in the next stage. * If additional development is necessary, * the VSR completes the development action(s), and * the process continues with the activity described in the next stage.   ***Important***: If the VSC is processing the appeal in a paperless environment, the process ends here.  ***References***: For information about   * claim development, see * [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart iii](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.iii), and * [M21-1MR, Part IV, Subpart ii, Chapter 1](imi-internal:M21-1MRIV.ii.1), or * claim development in VBMS, see the [job instruction sheets](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/VBMS/Resources_Job_Instruction_Sheets.asp) titled * *Initial Claim Development*, and * *Supplemental Claim Development*. |

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| Stage | Description |
| 22 | The VSR makes any necessary updates to VBA electronic systems.  If the VSC is processing the appeal in a paperless environment, the process ends here. Otherwise, the process continues with the activity described in the next stage. |
| 23 | If the mail is attached to a claims folder, the process continues with the activities described in the next stage. Otherwise,   * the VSR sends the mail to the file room to be drop-filed in the corresponding claims folder, and * the process ends here. |
| 24 | The VSR   * files down the mail in the claims folder * returns the claims folder to the file room, and * updates COVERs to reflect the new location of the claims folder. |

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| d. Additional Duties of VSRs on an Appeals Team | In addition to the responsibilities described in [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart i, 1.5.c](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.i.1.5.c), VSRs on an Appeals Team are also responsible for   * notifying beneficiaries of proposed adverse actions * deciding issues that do *not* require a rating decision * entering award data into VBA electronic systems, and * notifying claimants of decisions on their appeals.   SVSRs and certified GS-11 VSRs are responsible for authorizing/approving award actions.  ***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 [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart v](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.v) * issuing notice of a proposed adverse action, see * [M21-1MR, Part I, 2.B](imi-internal:M21-1MRI.2.B), and * [M21-1MR, Part IV, Subpart ii, 3.A](imi-internal:M21-1MRIV.ii.3.A), or * issuing decision notification, see [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart v, 2.B](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.v.2.B). |

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| e. Duties of DROs | See [M21-1MR, Part I, 5.C](imi-internal:M21-1MRI.5.C) for information about   * the duties of DROs, and * the DRO review process. |

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| f. 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 [M21-1MRIII, Subpart i, 1.4.h](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.i.1.4.h). |

#### 6. Public Contact Team

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| Introduction | This topic contains general information about the Public Contact Team, including   * responsibilities of the Public Contact Team, and * helping visitors with benefit-related issues. |

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| a. Responsibilities of the Public Contact Team | The Public Contact Team 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](http://www.benefits.va.gov/WARMS/docs/admin21/M27_1/Part_I/M27_1_ptI_ch6.doc). |

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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 Public Contact Team 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 [M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.C.10](imi-internal:M21-1MRIII.ii.1.C.10), and/or * route all documentation that requires action (other than updating the corporate record) to the VSC’s IPC. |