## Chapter 6. Quality Review Team (QRT)

#### Overview

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| In This Chapter | This chapter contains the following topics: |

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| 6.02 | Duties of the QRT |
| 6.03 | Management/Supervision |
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| 6.09 | QRTs – Going Beyond the Review |

Subchapter I. General

**6.01 Overview**

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| Introduction | This topic contains an overview of the QRT, including the* purpose of the QRT
* QRT participants
* QRT composition, and
* employee to QRS ratio.
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| a. Purpose of the QRT | The Compensation Service Quality Review Team (QRT) Program establishes a team of dedicated Quality Review Specialists (QRSs) with a focused emphasis on station quality in every Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) facility that processes compensation and pension claims.The purpose of the QRT is to improve the quality and timeliness of claims processing and decrease the amount of work performed on individual cases by evaluating station quality, identifying error trends, and ensuring individual employee reviews are performed monthly. Regional office (RO) production is expected to improve as benefit entitlement accuracy improves. |

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| b. QRT Participants | Participants in the QRT program include* Veterans Service Centers (VSCs)
* Appeals Management Center (AMC)
* Rating Activity Sites (RASs)
* Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES) Sites, and
* Consolidated Processing Sites (CPSs).
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| c. QRT Composition | Employees selected for the QRS position must meet their specific performance standards for quality and pass appropriate Skill Certification testing. Once selected for the QRS position, employees must participate in all consistency studies administered by Compensation Service. |

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| d. Employee to QRS Ratio | Each local QRT is comprised of at least one Authorization QRS (AQRS) and one Rating QRS (RQRS). It is recommended that a ratio of 1:10 be used to determine the number of RQRS employees to the number of Rating Veteran Service Representatives (RVSRs) and 1:14 be used to determine the number of AQRS employees to the number of Veterans Service Representatives (VSRs) required to support the RO. |

#### 6.02 Duties of the QRT

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| Introduction | This topic contains information about the duties of the QRT, including * primary duties of the QRT
* QRT involvement in training, and
* other areas of QRT involvement.
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| a. Primary Duties of the QRT | The following list outlines the appropriate duties to be performed by QRTs.* Monthly IQRs
* IPRs
* Feedback and training on error trends
* National Work Que (NWQ) Deferral Mitigations
* Peer reviews
* Preparation of cases for shipment/return from Systematic Technical Accuracy Review (STAR), to include corrective actions and quarterly STAR report
* Extended reviews (10 cases versus five cases per month) for employees on Performance Improvement Plans (PIPs)
* Special reviews identified by Compensation Service
* Second signature for cases with traumatic brain injury (TBI) and special monthly compensation (SMC) issues when the QRT has completed all required monthly IPRs and IQRs

***Note***: Each member of the QRT will perform both IPRs and IQRs on at least a quarterly rotational basis. This promotes consistency in the reviews and ensures each member of the QRT is exposed to both reviews on a routine basis. |

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| b. QRT Involvement in Training | The QRT, working with the VSC leadership and/or their designee, may be involved in different aspects of training. However, the primary focus of this team is to provide feedback and training on error trends identified during IQRs and IPRs.QRT members are also expected to provide feedback and training on national quality findings. Stations should review trend analysis reports from Automated Standardized Performance Elements Nationwide (ASPEN) and STAR to identify error trends. The identified needs should be shared with the station’s training coordinator to formulate and disseminate training to address those needs.  |

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| c. Other Areas of QRT Involvement | Other areas in which QRT (inclusive of QRT Coaches/Assistant Coaches) may be involved include * implementing results of feedback provided from Compensation Service such as STAR, or from training provided from inter-rater reliability studies (IRRS) and consistency questionnaires.
* providing specific training recommendations, at the employee level and station level, to improve quality based on the results of reviews.
* working in coordination with the RO Training Manager and/or VSC Training Coordinator to plan, direct, and identify who should conduct the training. This training may be recorded as station-determined training utilizing topics identified in the National Training Curriculum. If there is not an established Talent Management System (TMS) number, the station’s Training Manager may contact the Compensation Service Training Staff to request the addition of the selected item to the curriculum.
* conducting monthly meetings with station leadership and the RO Training Manager to identify trends and specific recommendations.
* working with Training Managers at VSCs to create and provide specific training identified by error trends and analysis.
* working with Training Managers at ROs to ensure training was recorded in TMS.
* tracking improvements after corrective actions are taken and follow-up with continuous monitoring.
* providing positive feedback to employees when quality improves.
* sharing all national STAR errors called on the station, as well as all local errors with Training Manager and Veterans Service Center Manager (VSCM).
* discussing error trends and the results of IRRSs and consistency studies in regular QRT meetings to identify weaknesses.
* distributing all IRRSs and consistency information to all employees.
* using national and local results to identify recurring issues at the individual or team level that require additional training.
* attending the monthly Quality Call and provide training to the station’s Decision Review Officers (DROs), RVSRs, and VSRs as applicable.
* maintaining their technical skill set by working production work on overtime as feasible. Any production work completed by a Quality Review Specialist (QRS) on overtime is subject to quality review from the team supervisor or designee.
* attending QRT Challenge training. Periodic training will be offered to accommodate new QRSs. Additional training will be provided as needed when Compensation Service process changes are identified. Additionally, it is mandatory that QRS employees complete any available instructor courses.
* participating in Quarterly Status calls with the Quality Review and Consistency team at VA Central Office (VACO) to discuss error trends, training needs, and other QRT issues.

***Note***: The responsibility of conducting training and answering questions from claims processors is not exclusive to the QRT. The QRT is responsible for providing training as it relates to the identification of error trends. All other training (including Challenge, national and local training, etc.) plus second-signature requirements are the responsibility of the Certified VSRs, Certified RVSRs, and Certified DROs who are designated to conduct these reviews. If it is determined that QRT members have time available after completing the above identified duties, station management may consider utilizing the QRT for second signatures.  |

#### 6.03 Management/Supervision

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| Introduction | This topic contains information about management/supervision, including* responsibilities of the
* QRT coach or other QRT supervisor
* VSCM for the QRT
* QRT peer reviews, and
* documenting overturned IQR errors.
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| a. Responsibilities of the QRT Coach or Other QRT Supervisor | The QRT Coach or other QRT supervisor is responsible for the efficient operation of the QRT and all of its responsibilities. The Coach is responsible for ensuring STAR errors are tracked and corrected within 30 days, per M21-4, 3.05. The Coach is also responsible for managing the random case selection process and maintaining copies of ASPEN random generated cases for review lists.***Important***: Records will be electronically maintained for three years or until an automated process is implemented.  |

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| b. Responsibilities of the VSCM for the QRT | The VSCM is responsible for assigning appropriate personnel, such as the QRT Coach, an Assistant VSCM, or a certified DRO, to complete IQRs for each QRS per the applicable performance standard.  |

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| c. QRT Peer Reviews | Per the procedure for national STAR reviews, the reviews conducted by the QRT will also be subject to a second review. Peer reviews will be performed within the QRT on all cases in which an error is called. Disagreements between QRS peer reviewers will be elevated to the QRT Coach, or designee, for resolution.The following guidelines should be followed when conducting peer reviews* peer review schedules will be established within the QRT
* all error calls will require a peer review, and
* peer reviews will be conducted within three business days of the original review so that timely feedback is provided to employees.
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| d. Documenting Overturned IQR Errors | Any IQR error that is overturned by a local RO official after it is recorded by the QRT in ASPEN and been through the local peer review process must be documented in the appropriate Compensation Service Quality Assurance SharePoint site. This allows for monitoring of the reasons for the change in the error call and trends for training purposes. Compensation Service will e-mail the SharePoint site for documenting these overturned IQR errors to the QRT and VSC mailboxes at each office.  |

Subchapter II. Methodology

#### 6.04 Reviews

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| Introduction | This topic contains information about reviews, including* the purpose of
* IQRs, and
* IPRs.
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| a. Purpose of IQRs | IQRs are the review of five randomly-selected cases per month (on average) for those VSRs, RVSRs, and DROs who have a quality element in their performance standards. This review determines the employee’s individual quality level as part of his or her overall performance evaluation. The intent of the performance standard is to obtain 60 IQRs every fiscal year for each person to assess the quality element in the standard. All QRT should manage their workload to average five cases reviewed per month on each eligible employee for a total of 60 completed each fiscal year.  |

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| b. Purpose of IPRs | An IPR is a review designed to correct deficiencies throughout the claims process, prior to promulgation, and identify training opportunities. Immediate feedback will be provided to employees so that prompt corrective action can be taken to resolve deficiencies. This feedback should be in the form of a direct discussion to explain the deficiency in detail, and provide citations and training to reinforce the correct action. ***Important***: These reviews are non-punitive and will not be used for individual performance management purposes. |

#### 6.05 Fundamentals of Quality Review

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| Introduction | This topic contains information about the fundamentals of quality review. |

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| a. Fundamentals of Quality Review | The fundamentals of quality review are listed below.* Perform a comprehensive review and analysis of all elements of processing the specific claim or issue.
* The standard for benefit entitlement errors is where the decision made rises to the level of a clear and unmistakable error (CUE) or a clear violation of current regulations or directives.
* The QRT must provide a manual and/or regulation citation or other appropriate reference to support every error call.
* Personal feelings should not enter into the error call. The only consideration is what the evidence shows and how it should be applied to the appropriate reference.
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#### 6.06 Individual Quality Reviews (IQRs)

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| Introduction | This topic contains information about IQRs, including* overview of IQRs
* review timeframe of IQRs
* recording method for IQRs
* review criteria for IQRs
* expanded sample size of IQRs
* case selections for IQRs
* procedure for using ASPEN random generator, and
* the appeal process for disagreements on employee performance reviews.
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| a. Overview of IQRs | The QRT will be responsible for performing local IQRs. These reviews will consist of a random selection of work based on the amount set forth in the national performance standards for each position. The selection of actions, while random, must reflect an appropriate mix of work performed by the employee throughout the month (i.e. not from a single day or single week). |

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| b. Review Timeframe of IQRs | IQRs will be completed within five business days of the QRS receiving the paper file or the case being assigned electronically to the QRS. |

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| c. Recording Method for IQRs | The results of the IQRs will be documented in ASPEN. |

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| d. Review Criteria for IQRs | A review of an individual’s work is intended as a performance measure to ascertain the quality element in that individual’s performance standard. Errors called locally will encompass more than the “benefit entitlement’ errors on the STAR Checklist.Use the table below to identify employees that are reviewed by the QRT. |

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| **Employee** | **Description** |
| VSR | Only VSRs who perform development actions, order medical examinations, and prepare or authorize award actions. |
| RVSR/DRO | Only RVSRs and DROs who are on production and complete decisions, ratings, and appeals. |

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| e. Expanded Sample Size of IQRs | Expanded sample sizes based on the amount set forth in the national performance standards for each position will be reviewed for quality purposes if a routine review of an employee’s work demonstrates the need for quality improvement over a 90 day period. ***Note***: After reviewing all local quality data for an employee, the QRT supervisor will initiate a request to the employee’s supervisor for an expanded review due to a demonstrated deficiency in quality.***Important***: Approval for the requested expanded review will come from the VSCM or designated appointee. |

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| f. Case Selections for IQRs | All IQRs will be selected using the ASPEN application. All QRSs will have appropriate access to ASPEN to conduct quality reviews.Use of the ASPEN generator *is required* for all types of work. * QRSs will run reports for work completed within the month of review.
* Reports will be exported to an Excel spreadsheet and a report of the cases reviewed will be maintained by the QRT Coach.
* Substitution of other cases will be annotated on the spreadsheet with the reason for the substitution.
* Review of five cases will be spread throughout the month (i.e. not from a single day or single week).
* Reviews are conducted as outlined in the performance standards.
* Reviews must reflect an appropriate mix of work/end products performed by the employee throughout the month of review.
* Reviews should be conducted prior to concurrence by a second signature to determine accuracy of originator.

***Note***: Running randomly generated lists with fewer cases more frequently will assist in obtaining cases before they process to the next level. Because logistics vary, stations should adjust the frequency until they achieve the proper balance of volume for review and the ability to timely obtain the necessary cases needed for local quality review. |

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| g. Procedure for Using ASPEN Random Generator | Follow the steps in the table below when using the ASPEN random generator. |

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| **Step** | **Action** |
| 1 | Access ASPEN through VBAPPS. |
| 2 | Select the appropriate station for review. |
| 3 | Select Quality Review Selection Report. |
| 4 | Select appropriate team. |
| 5 | Select dates (should be previous or current week). |
| 6 | Select number of randomly selected records per employee. |
| 7 | Copy list of cases randomly generated from ASPEN into an Excel spreadsheet. |
| 8 | Save in a designated electronic folder for QRT for historical and audit purposes for 3 years, per M21-4, 6.03(a). |
| 9 | Select cases for review. |
| 10 | Annotate any claim deselected and state the reason. Reasons for deselection are located in M21-4, 3.03(e). Additional reasons, as determined by each station may be identified in order to ensure a variety of work is being reviewed for each employee. |
| 11 | Annotate appropriately the claim selected for employee performance review by identifying: the employee who conducted the review, the date the case was assigned, the date the review was completed, and in the case of deselection, the reason the claim was deselected. |

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| ***Note***: Random generation of cases selected for individual performance assessment is a mandatory requirement. |

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| h. Appeal Process for Disagreements on Employee Performance Reviews | Some stations have worked with their local union to devise an appeal process for disagreements on error calls that impact an individual’s performance. For stations that have a memorandum of understanding in place with the local union, the error’s verification will be resolved based on the locally determined procedures. The table below describes the process to follow if there is no locally bargained agreement in place and an employee disagrees with an error call involving his/her IQR. |

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| **Stage** | **Description** |
| 1 | The employee has five business days after being notified of an error to express disagreement in writing. Employee must provide manual and/or regulation citation or other appropriate reference to support rebuttal of error call, in his/her written disagreement. |
| 2 | Disagreements with error calls more than five business days after notification will not be entertained except in rare circumstances as determined by the QRT Coach or designee. Rare circumstances would include such reasons as vacation or an illness that prevents the employee from submitting the written disagreement. |
| 3 | The employee and QRS will discuss the error in an attempt to resolve differences of opinion. |
| 4 | If the QRS and employee do not reach agreement on the error, the error will be resolved by locally determined procedures. |
| 5 | The employee will be notified of the final decision in writing.  |
| 6 | The only basis for overturning an error is because the QRT’s error call was incorrect which means there was no CUE or clear violation of a directive. The term benefit entitlement error is not for consideration in IQRs. |

#### 6.07 In-Process Reviews (IPRs)

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| Introduction | This topic contains information about IPRs, including* the purpose of IPRs
* focus of IPRs
* improving the claims process with IPRs
* using IPRs as a training tool
* quantity and selection of IPRs, and
* documenting IPRs conducted.
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| a. Purpose of IPRs | IPRs allow us to * identify errors early in the claims process
* place an emphasis on “getting the case right,” and
* improve the employee’s understanding of why these errors occur and how to prevent them in the future.

IPRs are an opportunity to identify and correct an error at the earliest possible time in a claim’s life cycle. Identified errors will be returned for correction before the case proceeds to the next stage. This process should be viewed as on-the-job training and will provide employees with an opportunity to develop a mentoring relationship with the QRS.***Important***: IPRs are always non-punitive and should not be used for individual performance purposes. |

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| b. Focus of IPRs | Currently IPRs are focused on * correction of errors made on examination requests
* rating decisions that are decided with an insufficient examination or medical opinion
* evaluation percentages assigned, and
* effective dates assigned.

These errors fall into the STAR B2, C2, and D1 Benefit Entitlement categories. These categories were selected because they represent the largest STAR error categories. As improvement is made in these areas, the IPRs may be refocused on a different benefit entitlement category. In addition, we have added development, system compliance and authorization IPRs to help increase accuracy and promote mentoring for all claims processors. |

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| c. Improving the Claims Process with IPRs | IPRs are meant to reduce errors at certain “touches,” or places, in the claims process where high error categories exist. In time, the results of these IPRs should significantly improve quality and timeliness, as offices systematically review claims during key “touches” and phases of the claim. ***Important***: IPRs will not be simultaneously completed on the same case for which an employee’s IQR is being performed. |

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| d. Using IPRs as a Training Tool | Detailed results of IPRs should be maintained as this information should be used to identify potential training needs of an individual employee or group of employees. Although IPRs are intended to be non-punitive, if it is noticed that an employee continues to make the same type of errors, then the information should be shared with the QRT Coach, and employee’s Coach. Management would then make a decision as to whether or not there is a need for increased IQRs to address a potential performance issue.  |

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| e. Quantity and Selection of IPRs | The number of IPRs completed per station should be ***no less than 10%*** of the expected monthly station production as identified on the station’s fiscal year dashboards. However, there is neither a requirement for a specific number of reviews per employee, nor designations from what particular team IPRs are selected. IPRs are directed locally at teams and/or individuals during all stages of the claims process to increase accuracy. As the selections are undertaken at various stages of the process, each employee has an opportunity to have a case selected but there is no guarantee that each employee will have a case selected for IPR review. |

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| f. Documenting IPRs conducted | The QRSs assigned to conduct IPRs will coordinate the identification and review of cases using the designated IPR checklist and provide immediate feedback to the employee. IPR checklists are available within the Quality Assurance SharePoint site. If other deficiencies outside the specific IPR checklist are noted during the review, they should be identified and corrected. All IPRs will be entered, captured, and recorded into the SharePoint site provided by Compensation Service. Compensation Service will provide training for any changes to IPR checklists.  |

#### 6.08 S1 Error Guidance – Systems Compliance

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| Introduction | This topic contains guidance for S1 errors (Systems Compliance). |

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| **a. Checklist for S1 Errors** | QRSs will use the following checklist to call S1 errors:* Is the date of claim and end product correct?
* Are all the payees' addresses (including direct deposit information) correct?
* Are all periods of service for the Veteran verified and updated in all systems?
* Was the Power of Attorney (POA) information/access updated in all systems and correspondence?
* Were special issues and flashes entered and correct?
* Were contentions and classifications entered correctly?
* Were tracked items entered and updated as necessary?
* Was the claim status (Ready for Decision (RFD), Rating Decision Complete (RDC), OPEN) updated appropriately?
* Were the suspense dates (tracked item or claim level) updated and correct?

***Notes***: * ROs are required to utilize this list when calling S1 errors. Local guidance will not be used to call S1 – System Compliance errors.
* QRSs are required to call S1 errors on an IQR for VSRs when any of the above have not been completed or have been completed incorrectly.
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#### 6.09 QRTs – Going Beyond the Review

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| Introduction | This topic contains information about QRTs going beyond the review. |

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| a. QRTs – Going Beyond the Review | What kind of actions can the QRT take to ensure there is camaraderie between themselves and the VSC claim processors? Positive reinforcement and utilizing recognition programs are key to maintaining an effective working relationship between the QRT and the claims processors.The following actions are examples of positive ways to build the relationship between these groups:* Blue Ribbon Program/Salutes - awarded to employees by the QRSs for successful completion of a difficult case (i.e., Parkinson’s disease with multiple secondary manifestations, etc.) or when an employee achieves 100% quality for a given month.
* STAR Card/Certification of Excellence.
* “Atta-boy” e-mails to employee and supervisor.
* Consistent recognition of 100% quality.
* A QRT newsletter as a way to centrally collect and disseminate quality-centric information such as stats (monthly, quarterly, and annually), error trends, and recommendations on how to avoid/reduce errors in a particular area without deploying a full training session. Newsletters serve as a method for providing clarification on topics that arose during training or that arrived in a station’s training mailbox. Also, it affords the QRT an opportunity to recognize the efforts of employees (both QRT and non-QRT).
* Focus e-mails are quick blasts of information on a specific topic (i.e., when to infer incompetency). Depending on the topic, references may be included. These e-mails come out ad hoc and generally come from the training mailbox.
* The QRT newsflash is used to focus on a particular topic. The newsflash is a way for the RO to use errors that have been called either locally or nationally. References, as well as a recommendation/friendly reminder, accompany each highlighted error to help employees avoid making the same mistake in the future. These generally are one page in length.
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