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Chapter 3. Telephone Interviews

1. General Guidelines for Conducting Telephone Interviews

Introduction This section contains information on general guidelines for conducting telephone interviews, including:

- the purpose of the telephone interview
 - conducting the interview
 - documenting information
 - important points to remember
 - powers of attorney (POAs)
 - authorized third parties (via 21-0845)
 - providing information to claimants via interpreters
 - using Automated Data Processing (ADP)
 - types of information suitable for telephone development
 - instant messages (via MS Communicator)
 - telephone requests from claimants desiring to review their claims file
 - retrieval of information erroneously sent to claimants, and
 - using absolute statements when explaining the claims or appeal process.
-

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a. Purpose of the Telephone Interview The purpose of the telephone interview is to provide timely, accurate, high-quality responses, and world-class customer service to Veterans and other callers who contact the National Call Center or National Pension Call Center (NCC/NPCC) for benefits information and assistance.

b. Conducting the Interview Follow the steps below to conduct the telephone interview.

Step	Action
1	Greet the caller using the standard VA-approved greeting (VA, this is [name]. How may I help you?)

Continued on next page

1. General Guidelines for Conducting Telephone Interviews, Continued

b. Conducting the Interview (continued)

Step	Action				
2	Verify the identity of the caller.				
3	Is the caller the Veteran (or an authorized third party) requesting information? <table border="1"><thead><tr><th>Yes</th><th>No</th></tr></thead><tbody><tr><td>Provide the information as per FOIA User Guide.</td><td>Provide information as appropriate to a third party request as per Fast Letter 10-49, "VA Form 21-0845, Authorization to Disclose Personal Information to a Third Party".</td></tr></tbody></table>	Yes	No	Provide the information as per FOIA User Guide .	Provide information as appropriate to a third party request as per Fast Letter 10-49 , " VA Form 21-0845, Authorization to Disclose Personal Information to a Third Party ".
Yes	No				
Provide the information as per FOIA User Guide .	Provide information as appropriate to a third party request as per Fast Letter 10-49 , " VA Form 21-0845, Authorization to Disclose Personal Information to a Third Party ".				

c. Documenting Information

Completely document all information received during the call on VA Form 21-0820 (Series), Report of General Information, or the equivalent, such as the Informal Conference Report for Decision Review Officers (DROs).

d. Important Points to Remember for Conducting Telephone Interviews

When documenting telephone calls on *VA Form 21-0820 (Series)*, keep in mind that:

- beneficiaries are *not* required to advise VA in writing of
 - changes in income or net worth, or
 - changes in dependency status, such as loss of a dependent due to death, divorce, or annulment of a marriage.

e. Powers of Attorney

If the caller has a Power of Attorney (POA), ensure the POA information is noted on [VA Form 21-0820](#).

The RO of jurisdiction is responsible for forwarding a copy of the [VA Form 21-0820](#) to the recognized POA.

Continued on next page

1. General Guidelines for Conducting Telephone Interviews, Continued

f. Providing Information to Claimants via Interpreters

On occasion, we receive inquiries from hearing impaired claimants through interpreters.

- Office of General Counsel has approved the use of the Federal Relay 711 Service for hearing impaired customers.
- Information may be provided as long as the necessary identification protocol is followed.
 - The necessary identification protocol consists of Veteran's full name, claim or Social Security number, and Veteran's branch of service.
- For a change of address and/or establishment of direct deposit, the advanced identification protocol that must be met includes the basic information listed above as well as the Veteran's or claimant's address of record, the current benefit amount, and date of birth of Veteran/claimant.
- When the caller requests to make a change to an existing direct deposit account, the advanced identification protocol that must be met includes the basic information above as well as the Veteran's or claimant's bank account number of record, the current benefit amount, and date of birth of Veteran or claimant. As long as the necessary identification protocol is met, claimant information and establishment or changes to a direct deposit account may be provided to the caller using the Federal Relay 711 Service.

Note: If the PCR receives a call from a hearing-impaired caller or third party interpreter not utilizing the Federal Relay 711 Service, PCRs are expected to provide the caller the 711 number for utilization when calling VA. .

g. Using ADP

Make full use of Automated Data Processing (ADP) tools (e.g. Share, VETSNET, VACOLS, Virtual VA, etc.) and capabilities to resolve issues before completing a Veterans' Assistance Inquiry (VAI).

h. Types of Information Suitable for Telephone Development

It is very important to note and understand exactly what types of information may be obtained for development via telephone:

Continued on next page

1. General Guidelines for Conducting Telephone Interviews, Continued

h. Types of Information Suitable for Telephone Development (continued)

- Social Security numbers of dependents
- mailing address and direct deposit information
- date(s) of birth
- Reserve or National Guard unit information such as addresses
- information concerning retired, severance, or readjustment pay
- names and addresses of physicians or medical record numbers
- dependency status, name and address of person having custody of child(ren)
- income information (for example, change in income or date of receipt of first Social Security payment)
- informal claim
- any claim for subsequent benefits
- VCAA waiver notice
- due process waiver

h. Types of Information Suitable for Telephone Development (continued)

- clarification of medical expenses (but not the initial reporting)
- verification of Medicaid-covered nursing home status
- burial claim clarification information (for example, status of unpaid bills/expenses), and
- whether the Veteran has service treatment, personnel, or other records to provide.

i. Requests to Review Claims File

If a Veteran or claimant makes a request to review his/her claims file in person at the regional office having possession of the file:

- initiate a Veterans' Assistance Inquiry (VAI) via IRIS to the regional office of jurisdiction (ROJ) requesting an appointment to review the file
- the regional office will contact the requester and schedule an appointment

Note: Under **no** circumstances should the PCR instruct the caller to simply visit the regional office and ask to review the file.

This procedure will allow the affected Public Contact Team time to ensure that the folder is on station and will be available for review at the appointed time.

**j. Retrieval of
Erroneously
Sent
Information**

In the event you receive a call from a claimant indicating they have erroneously received information belonging to another individual, proceed as follows:

Step	Action
1	Thank the caller for informing VA of the situation.
2	Complete the Report of General Information (VA Form 21-0820)
3	Ask the caller to provide you with the first line of information under the heading "In Reply To." (Note: If there are no initials provided, ask the caller to go to the last page of the letter and provide the information after "Enclosure" line (Some regional offices use a <i>tag line</i>).
4	Ask the caller for the regional office address at the top of the letter.
5	Identify the privacy violation, such as incorrect claim number or Social Security number, name, address, rating decision, etc.

**j. Retrieval of
Erroneously
Sent
Information**
(continued)

6	Obtain the caller's name, phone number, and file number.
7	Advise caller that the Privacy Act Officer will be in contact with him/her to discuss the retrieval of the documents.
8	Email the encrypted 21-0820 to your supervisor, who will forward it to the station's Public Contact Team (PCT) coach.

Depending on the circumstances, a telephone notification from the NCC supervisor to the appropriate PCT coach may be prudent.

Note: It is the responsibility of the regional office of jurisdiction to report any privacy violations and to arrange for the return of the erroneously sent materials.

**k. Using
Absolute
Statements**

When explaining the basic claims or appeals process, be very careful about using absolute statements. For example, we cannot tell a caller "when all evidence is received, the file will go to the rating board and a decision will be made."

There are many variables involved in the claims/appeals process and the claim/appeal could be returned for further development (e.g., exam request, request for additional medical records, etc.).

Continued on next page

1. General Guidelines for Conducting Telephone Interviews, Continued

**k. Using
Absolute
Statements**
(continued)

Example of a proper response: “After all requested evidence is received, your claim file will go to the Rating Board for review. If additional evidence is needed, you will be contacted by someone or you may receive a letter asking for more information or informing you of any additional action which may be needed. If no additional evidence is needed, we will make a decision.”

**l. Providing an
Appropriate
Status to All
Open/Pending/
Tracked Items**

While a caller may inquire about a specific claim, a review of the appropriate systems may reveal the caller has multiple issues/items pending.

It is the PCR’s responsibility to provide a status on *any* open pending item requested by the caller.

2. Personal Telephone Calls

Introduction This topic contains guidance on handling personal telephone calls, including:

- policy, and
 - emergency telephone calls of a personal nature.
-

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a. Policy Regarding Personal Telephone Calls The appropriate time for employees to make personal telephone calls is before their scheduled tour of duty, during lunch periods and breaks, and after their tour of duty.

b. Emergency Telephone Calls If an employee receives an emergency telephone call during an active telephone call with a customer, the employee should attempt to complete that call prior to taking the emergency call. If continuing with the active call is not practical, the caller should be tactfully transferred to another PCR or a supervisor.

Important: Do not, under any circumstances, place the caller on hold to take the emergency call.

3. Call Referral Guidelines

Introduction This topic contains guidance on referring telephone calls, including:

- policy
 - when to use Veterans Assistance Inquiries (VAIs)
 - VAIs for Congressional inquiries, and
 - referrals for homeless Veterans.
-

Change Date Initial content load September 2012

a. Policy for Referring Telephone Calls Follow the below steps when determining the appropriateness of referring a telephone call:

Step	Action
1	Determine the caller's issues <i>before</i> considering a referral.
2	Assist the caller with general questions <i>IF</i> you are able to answer the question. For general benefits questions, refer to <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Federal Benefits for Veterans, Dependents and Survivors• <i>Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)</i>, found on the various business line web sites.• <i>PCR Tool Box</i> Important: If you are able to answer all of the caller's questions or concerns, provide the business line's toll-free telephone number for future reference.
3	If a referral is appropriate, provide the caller with the program-specific toll-free telephone number and then complete a warm transfer.

Continued on next page

3. Call Referral Guidelines, Continued

b. When to Use VAIs In some cases, the caller will insist upon speaking with the “home” regional office (RO).

Always assist the caller by informing him/her of the information available from online resources and that this information is the same as the “home” RO will be reviewing.

If the caller continues to insist on contacting the “home” office, take the following steps:

Step	Action
1	Advise the caller you will send an internal note via computer to the “home” RO.
2	Inform the caller that the “home” RO will contact him/her within ten business days.
3	Ensure you have correct telephone numbers for any call back. <i>Note:</i> This is extremely important.
4	Create a Veterans Assistance Inquiry (VAI) using the Inquiry Routing and Information System (IRIS) . <i>Note:</i> Provide the caller with the inquiry number for future reference.

c. Congressional Inquiries Upon receipt of a telephone call regarding the status of *any* Congressional inquiry, take a VAI and forward it to the regional office of jurisdiction (ROJ) for response.

Do not under *any* circumstances refer the caller back to the Congressional office.

Continued on next page

3. Call Referral Guidelines, Continued

d. Homeless and Justice-Involved Veteran Referrals

In all cases, refer homeless and justice-involved Veterans to the local RO Homeless Veterans Outreach Coordinator Justice-Involved Veterans Coordinator (HVOC-JIVC) so they can provide local assistance. For more information on Homeless and Justice-Involved Veterans, refer to [II.2.2.](#)

Field Code Changed

In cases where the Veteran may have a claim pending at a different station, the *local* RO is considered the ROJ and is responsible for the close coordination necessary for having the claim properly expedited.

Under **NO** circumstances should a homeless Veteran be referred to both the *local* RO and the station working the claim for assistance.

The process for referring Homeless Veterans is available on the [Homeless Veterans Home Page](#).

4. Quality Interview Expectations

Introduction This topic provides the expectations for conducting quality interviews.

Change Date Initial content load September 2012

a. Expectations for Conducting Interviews To ensure VA's callers receive the highest quality response when conducting telephone interviews, VA employees shall:

- answer all calls as promptly as possible
- identify themselves by name and ask how may I help you
- provide callers with complete and accurate information
- comply with Privacy Act, Freedom of Information Act, and Automated Data Processing (ADP) Security requirements
- gather sufficient information from the caller to answer questions and develop any issues indicating potential eligibility for a benefit or benefits
- make full use of ADP capabilities to resolve issues before completing a VAI
- discuss with the caller any VA or non-VA related benefits as required
- control the interview, avoiding irrelevant discussions and topics not pertinent to the interview
- exhibit a caring and courteous attitude in an objective, understanding manner, and
- avoid using technical jargon.

5. Prescribed Opening and Closing of Calls

Introduction This topic provides guidance on how to properly open and close all telephone related interviews or inquiries, including:

- opening of calls
 - parts of the call opening
 - example of call opening
 - finishing phrases
 - examples of finishing phrases, and
 - closing the call.
-

Change Date Initial content load September 2012

a. Opening of Calls The initial opening of the telephone call is of critical importance in that it may potentially set the tone for the interview or inquiry. Properly done, a good, professional opening can convey your:

- attitude to the caller
 - confidence, and
 - willingness to be of service.
-

b. Parts of the Call Opening The opening of the telephone call has three parts:

- identification of the organization (for example, Department of Veterans Affairs or VA)
 - personal identification (your name), and
 - an opening phrase.
-

c. Example of Call Opening “Department of Veterans Affairs (or VA). This is (or my name is) (first name only, first and last name or Mr./Mrs./Ms. Last name). How may I help you?”

d. Finishing Phrases After summarizing the actions you have completed, the use of a finishing phrase is helpful in steering the conversation to a successful close. This is especially true when dealing with a talkative or rambling caller.

Note: Use care when using finishing phrases. Depending upon your tone and the way the phrase is presented, it may be misconstrued as rude.

Continued on next page

5. Prescribed Opening and Closing of Calls, Continued

e. Examples of Finishing Phrases

When possible, try and use the following examples of finishing phrases:

- “It’s been nice talking with you today, but I do have to go now.”
 - “Thank you for calling. I wish I had more time to talk with you, but I have to go now.”
 - “Well, it’s been great talking with you today.”
 - “I wish I wasn’t so busy today so I could spend more time talking with you.”
 - “Thanks for calling today. I do have to take some other calls now.”
 - “Well, it sure sounds like we’ve covered everything today. Thanks for calling.”
-

f. Closing the Call

Use the following four steps in closing the telephone call:

Step	Action
1	Summarize the major points of the call.
2	Ask “Have I answered your question(s) pertaining to your inquiry today?”
3	Sign off with “Good-Bye” or a similar appropriate word or phrase.
4	Let the caller disconnect FIRST .

6. Courtesy Tips

Introduction This topic provides some general courtesy tips and guidance, including:

- customer service and courtesy
 - your speaking voice and how to improve it
 - your listening skills and how to improve them
 - acknowledging the caller's feelings
 - effective customer service techniques
 - being caring and considerate
 - being committed to customer service, and
 - being creative, controlled, and having a contagious attitude.
-

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a. Customer Service and Courtesy Good customer service is a direct by-product of how courteous we are to our callers. By using a proactive approach and emphasis in the following areas, we can ensure we provide professional, consistent, and meaningful customer service to our callers. These areas include:

- your speaking voice
 - your active listening skills
 - acknowledging your caller's feelings, and
 - use of effective customer service techniques.
-

b. Your Speaking Voice How you use your voice is more critical over the telephone because the caller is not able to use visual communication tools to gauge your level of involvement in the conversation. As such, you must be able to project your customer service attitude through your voice.

c. How to Improve Your Speaking Voice Use the following five methods to improve your speaking voice:

- speak in low tones
 - articulate
-

Continued on next page

6. Courtesy Tips, Continued

c. How to Improve Your Speaking Voice (continued)

- match the other person's rate of speech (take note that you are not speaking at a rate too fast for your caller to comprehend)
 - control volume (do not allow your voice to indicate disturbance) – if your caller begins to speak in a louder tone in reference to their frustration:
 - attempt to lower your volume since the caller will often lower the volume of their voice to match the volume of the conversation
 - use voice inflections (changing the pitch of your voice to create enthusiasm or concern)
-

d. Your Listening Skills

Active listening skills are just as important as your speaking skills, if not more so. The ability to listen to your caller is of paramount importance in order to allow you to properly assess the purpose of the call and what the caller expects from you.

e. How to Improve Your Listening Skills

Use the following seven methods to improve your listening skills:

- Visualize what you are hearing (not what you are going to do later on)
 - Take notes on the important parts of the conversation
 - Do not interrupt or cut off the caller (however, it may be necessary to utilize call control techniques to resolve a rambling call)
 - Listen for feelings (is the caller anxious, argumentative, or distressed?)
 - Acknowledge what the caller is saying (best way to accomplish this is to paraphrase the caller or use an empathetic statement).
 - Ask questions (this will help you understand and will show you are engaged in the process).
 - Concentrate (the most fundamental skill in effective listening).
-

f. Acknowledging the Caller's Feelings

One of the most important aspects of *world-class service* is to show your caller that you are sympathetic or understanding of their situation and feelings. By using the four methods below, your caller will recognize that you are “hearing” them and want to be of service.

These methods are:

- showing empathy
 - asking questions
 - giving feedback, and
 - summarizing the problem or issue.
-

Continued on next page

6. Courtesy Tips, Continued

g. Effective Customer Service Techniques

The final area to address in ensuring our callers receive the courteous service they deserve is the use of effective customer service techniques. These seven techniques, called “The 7 C’s,” are provided below:

- caring
 - confident
 - considerate
 - committed
 - creative
 - controlled, and
 - contagious
-

h. Being Caring

Care about *VA*. Show loyalty. (Do not tell a caller that someone else made a mistake.)

Care about *the customer*. Do not view a phone call as an interruption of your job. View it as your job – *it is*, you know.

Care about *yourself*. Be careful of stress and burnout. Know the signs and learn how to deal with them.

i. Being Confident

Be confident in *your ability to handle your interactions*. If you do not know the answer, advise your caller that you “will be happy to research the information for them.”

Be confident of *your technical knowledge*. As you use your technical skills, it will become second nature to you. **Remember:** No *one person* will have the ability to answer all of the questions that may be asked, but you will be provided with the tools and training to be successful in your position.

j. Being Considerate

Be considerate *of the customer*. If the customer is upset, do not gloss over it. Acknowledge the customer’s feelings and attempt to address his/her concerns.

Continued on next page

6. Courtesy Tips, Continued

k. Being Committed to Customer Service

Go *the extra step*. Make appropriate referrals. Do not just tell customers they have the wrong department or agency. Help them to reach the department or agency they need.

l. Being Creative

Be *resourceful*. There will be many days when you will repeatedly get the same questions over and over again (**Example**: “I didn’t get my check on the first!”) Take it as a challenge to be *innovative* with your answers and don’t allow the repeated questions to cause you to provide those later callers with a lower level of customer service.

m. Being Controlled

Do not lose it! No matter how angry a customer gets, you must *always maintain control*. Always remember: It isn’t you the customer is angry with – it’s the situation.

n. Having a Contagious Attitude

Remember: *What goes around comes around*. If you challenge the customer, it will often times create more anger and cause you to lose control of your call.

7. Recognizing Caller Types

Introduction This topic provides information on the four basic caller types.

Change Date Initial content load September 2012

a. Four Caller Types There are four basic caller types:

- the “Assertive/Demanding” Caller
- the “Talkative” Caller
- the “Passive” Caller, and
- the “Angry” Caller.

The table below provides some general tips on how to best deal with these various caller types.

Caller Type	Response Tips
Assertive/Demanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Listen closely.• Use closed questions to help control the conversation.• Be friendly, but specific and direct• Remain courteous
Talkative	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use direct, closed-ended questions.• Use shorter pauses when responding.• Do not invite unnecessary conversation.• Keep your response to a minimum.• Always direct the conversation back to primary reason for calling.

Continued on next page

7. Recognizing Caller Types, Continued

a. Four Caller Types (continued)

Caller Type	Response Tips
Passive	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• These callers are usually easy to manage.• They usually do not complain and simply want the answer to their question and to terminate the call.
Angry	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Listen closely to ensure you understand the problem or concern.• Relate to the caller in a general way (if possible).• Remain calm and avoid involvement in the caller's emotions.• Remain courteous.

8. Handling Threatening or Abusive Calls

Introduction This topic contains information on handling threatening or abusive calls, including:

- general information and tips
 - handling abusive language or behavior
 - documenting the abusive call
 - threats to computer systems
 - personal threats to an employee, and
 - bomb threats
-

Change Date Initial content load September 2012

a. General Information on Threatening or Abusive Calls The vast majority of our callers make inquiries in a calm and polite manner. However, there will be occasions when you will be confronted with an angry, threatening, or abusive caller. The two main points to remember when dealing with these types of callers are:

- remain calm, and
- do not lose personal control.

Important: *Never* lower yourself to the level of the abusive caller. Use of abusive or foul language by VBA personnel is *never* professional, appropriate, or condoned. Further, the use of such language by our employees is a conduct issue that will be addressed by management as appropriate.

b. Tips on Dealing With Abusive or Foul Language When confronted with abusive or foul language:

- become silent
- do not respond in anger, or
- do not respond at all.

Following these tips will usually quiet the foul language and allow the conversation to continue.

Continued on next page

8. Handling Threatening or Abusive Calls, Continued

c. Handling Abusive Language or Behavior

VBA does not expect its employees to tolerate or listen to abusive language or behavior on the part of its callers. There are times when the only prudent or appropriate course of action is to terminate the call by hanging up the phone.

However, *before* disconnecting the call, inform the caller:

- “I want to help you.”
- “I’m asking that you please stop using foul language.”
- “If you do not stop, I will need to disconnect the call.”

If the caller refuses to stop and continues using abusive or foul language take the following actions:

- inform the caller that because he/she would not stop as requested, the call will be disconnected
 - ask the caller to please call back when he/she is in a position to discuss the situation more calmly, and
 - say good-bye and hang up (ensure you use a professional and appropriate tone).
-

d. Documenting the Abusive Call

Immediately upon terminating the call, prepare an email or *VA Form 21-0820* to briefly describe and outline the situation, giving the caller’s name if possible. In addition, PCRs should enter a complete MAP-D narrative describing the call in detail. Forward this documentation to your direct supervisor.

If the caller telephones at a later time and asks to speak with a supervisor, the supervisor will be better able to properly discuss the situation with the caller.

e. Threats to Computer Systems

When confronted with a threat to our computer systems:

- immediately complete [VA Form 21-0820](#), fully documenting the threat
 - immediately provide copies to:
 - your immediate supervisor
 - the local ISO
 - the regional office director, and
 - the information technology (IT) staff, if the threat involves IT resources.
-

Continued on next page

8. Handling Threatening or Abusive Calls, Continued

**f. Personal
Threats to an
Employee**

Employee safety is a priority and workplace violence will not be tolerated. Threats to our employees are taken very seriously and violators are prosecuted.

If you receive a threat by telephone, directed against yourself or any VA employee, remain calm, be courteous, and listen. Do not interrupt the caller. Record the appropriate information on the [Personal Threat Information Checklist](#) (available on the PCR index).

**g. Bomb
Threats**

Most bomb threats are received by telephone. Bomb threats should always be considered serious until proven otherwise. You should act quickly, but remain calm and obtain as much information as you can, using the [Bomb Threat Checklist](#) (available on the PCR index).

9. Handling Requests to Speak With Specific Individuals

Introduction This topic contains information on handling requests from our callers to speak with specific individuals.

Change Date Initial content load September 2012

a. When the Caller Initially Requests a Specific Individual In rare instances, our callers will request to speak with a certain or specific individual for assistance. When confronted with this type of request, follow the steps below:

Step	Action
1	Explain it is our policy to not transfer calls to specific individuals.
2	Explain that you have access to the same information as the requested individual and have the ability to assist him/her with the inquiry.
3	Assure the caller that you want to help and ask for the opportunity to do so.

b. When the Caller Continues to Request a Specific Individual If the caller is not persuaded and continues to request a specific individual, follow the steps below:

Step	Action
1	Apologize to the caller for being unable to meet his/her request.
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reiterate the policy of not transferring calls to specific individuals, and • ask again if he/she will allow you the opportunity to assist.
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the caller continues to refuse, apologize for not being able to assist the caller, and • inform him/her that you will have to terminate the call.

10. When to Refer a Call to a Supervisor

Introduction This topic contains information on when to refer a call to a supervisor, including:

- general guidance, and
 - examples of appropriate reasons to refer the call.
-

Change Date Initial content load September 2012

a. Background on Referring Calls to a Supervisor In the vast majority of the telephone calls you receive, you will be able to adequately handle the inquiry. However, there are occasions when referral of the call to your supervisor is appropriate.

b. Examples of Appropriate Reasons to Refer the Call The following example illustrates when referring a call to your supervisor is appropriate:

- when the caller demands it, *but* only after attempting to assist the caller yourself
 - when a Veteran with a fiduciary indicates that there is an emergency situation (and a [21-0820](#) sent via non-emergency e-mail or VAI will not resolve the emergency in a timely fashion) -- and the PCR believes that it is an emergent situation -- the PCR must request supervisory assistance.
 - when a Veteran was recently made homeless and does not know where to go for help and the Homeless Coordinator is not available, PCRs should contact their supervisor for assistance.
-

11. Suicidal Callers

Introduction This topic contains information on suicidal callers, including:

- important points to remember
 - important contact information
 - primary goals
 - two basic rules
 - general approach and philosophy
 - response strategies
 - steps on handling calls
 - symptoms of suicidal tendencies, and
 - additional pointers.
-

Change Date Initial content load September 2012

a. Important Points to Remember for Suicidal Calls When you receive a suicide call, *do not, under any circumstances*, place the caller on hold.

b. Important Contact Information for Suicidal Calls The VA Suicide Hotline can be reached at: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

The internal warm transfer number is: 585-393-7938

The following web site includes a state-by-state listing of suicide prevention organizations: www.suicidehotlines.com

c. Primary Goals for Dealing With Suicidal Callers The primary goals when dealing with a suicidal caller are to:

- keep the caller alive
 - keep the caller from any further injury, and
 - put the caller in contact with a trained crisis center.
-

Continued on next page

11. Suicidal Callers, Continued

d. Two Basic Rules for Dealing With Suicidal Callers

There are two basic rules when dealing with these types of calls:

- take all suicidal threats seriously, and
 - remain calm and listen carefully.
-

e. General Approach and Philosophy for Dealing With Suicidal Callers

The general approach and philosophy when dealing with these types of calls is to:

- be caring and empathetic
 - express genuine concern
 - recognize and acknowledge the caller's pain and despair
 - express a desire to work with the caller
 - encourage the caller to contact a crisis center or mental health facility
 - focus on the fact that the caller has telephoned and therefore recognizes that something is wrong and he/she is seeking help, and
 - inform the caller that there are trained people who can help.
-

f. Response Strategies for Dealing With Suicidal Callers

Use the following response strategies when dealing with a suicidal caller:

- seek supervisory and second-party assistance, and
 - emphasize that the caller is reaching out so he/she recognizes their needs help.
-

Continued on next page

11. Suicidal Callers, Continued

g. Steps on Handling Suicidal Calls

Use the table below as a general guide for handling suicide calls.

Important: Remember that each suicidal crisis is different.

Step	Action
1	Remain calm and do not panic (<i>Do not place caller on hold</i>).
2	Get the attention of someone close who can alert a supervisor or utilize the “emergency” button on the Broome Closet.
3	At this point, if the caller is willing to be transferred and is not in immediate danger, attempt to transfer the call to the suicide hotline using the warm transfer number.
4	<p>If the caller is unwilling to be transferred:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • do as the caller wants. • remain on the telephone. • do <i>not</i> transfer or place the caller on hold. <p>Note: The supervisor should silently monitor the call and seek second-party assistance through a</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VA medical facility • local counseling psychologist, and/or • local suicide prevention organization.
5	<p>Rally Support. Ask the caller</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • his/her name, present location, and phone number (and home telephone number, if different from present location) • whether he/she has been drinking or using drugs (Important: If an overdose is suspected, contact a Poison Control Center or send an ambulance). • whether anyone else is with him/her • the names and phone numbers of family, friends, or a significant other, and • whether the caller is currently receiving treatment.

Continued on next page

11. Suicidal Callers, Continued

g. Steps on Handling Suicidal Calls (continued)

Step	Action
6	Evaluate the crisis. Ask the following questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “What are you thinking and feeling?” • “Do you have a specific plan?” • “Do you have a weapon?” (<i>Note:</i> If the caller says “yes,” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – ask the caller to place the weapon in another room while you remain on the telephone, and – have a supervisor or co-worker immediately contact the police.) • “Have you previously attempted suicide?” • “Are you having trouble sleeping?” (<i>Notes:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Long periods of sleeplessness can impair judgment and create likelihood of high suicidal risk, and – too much sleep can also be a danger sign.)
7	Continue with call until crisis is managed and under control, and the call can be safely terminated.

h. Symptoms of Suicidal Tendencies

Other symptoms of suicidal tendencies include:

- severe depression, hopelessness, and helplessness
- disorientation, confusion, and chaos
- extreme agitation, tension, and anxiety
- guilt, shame, and embarrassment, and
- feelings of rage, anger, hostility, and revenge.

i. Additional Pointers for Suicidal Calls

When dealing with these types of calls, *be prepared. Remember:*

- each suicidal crisis is unique
- your response will depend on the specific needs of the caller
- if the caller refuses help, give the caller the telephone number and address of the nearest Suicide Prevention/Crisis Intervention Center (provide the number to the suicide hotline)
- prepare a MAP-D note, and
- focus your **FULL** attention on the distressed caller.

12. Change of Address and Direct Deposit Request Procedures

Introduction This topic contains information on processing requests for a change in address or direct deposit, including:

- direct deposit changes by powers of attorney (POAs)
 - general information on effective dates of change
 - cut-off dates for changes in address and initiation of direct deposit
 - processing changes in Share
 - closed accounts at financial institutions, and
 - the correct abbreviations to use.
-

Change Date Initial content load September 2012

a. Direct Deposit Changes POAs It is **not** VA's policy to permit a POA to change claimant or beneficiary direct deposit information by telephone.

Direct deposit information by definition, involves the claimant's or beneficiary's funds. The potential for abuse, however remote, is real. We should, therefore, err on the side of caution. Requests by POAs to change or initiate direct deposit accounts must be done in person or in writing.

b. General Information on Effective Dates of Change Employees should tell every caller the effective date of change when processing inquiries about changes of address or direct deposit.

The effective date for changes to address or direct deposit is governed by the Schedule of Operations. For compensation and pension, there are two important cut-off dates each month that affect the input of direct deposit requests.

Reference: For convenience, the Cut-off Date to Change C&P Payment Method document is updated monthly and available on the PCR Toolbox. The Schedule of Operations may also be found on the PCR Toolbox.

Continued on next page

12. Change of Address and Direct Deposit Request Procedures, Continued

c. Cut-Off Date for Changes in Address To determine the effective date for *changes* to address or direct deposit review the Schedule of Operations and check the date cycle which is preceded by a “*”.

When the change date is set with the “*” preceding the date, the change of address should be effective the following month.

d. Cut-Off Date to Initiate Direct Deposit To determine the effective date for initiating direct deposit, review the Schedule of Operations and check Column “3C.” (*Note:* This is the date corresponding with “00-99” under “Updating of Future for Non-EFT Master Records.”)

If the direct deposit is initiated by this date, the change should be effective the following month.

e. Processing Changes in Share When processing a mailing or payment address using Share, if the initiation date is completed *after* the cut-off cycle date, the change will not become effective until the following month.

When changing an address in Share, place a check mark in the “Use for Payment Address” field if there is *no* direct deposit and the beneficiary is not providing another address for benefit payments.

If address contains an apartment, suite, or room number, enter the number *above* the street address in Share.

f. Closed Accounts at Financial Institutions If a payee has closed his/her account and the cut-off cycle date has passed, it can be suggested that the payee contact their financial institution and request their account be reopened in order to receive the funds. (*Note:* It should be noted that financial institutions will comply with this type of request on rare occasions only.)

Generally, if the financial institution receives funds against a closed account, those funds are returned electronically to the U.S. Treasury unless the account has a negative balance.

The U.S. Treasury will then reissue the funds to the payee via paper check.

Continued on next page

12. Change of Address and Direct Deposit Request Procedures, Continued

f. Closed Accounts at Financial Institutions (continued)

Important: It is *extremely* important to ensure that we have the correct address information for the payee in the system to ensure the U.S. Treasury sends the check to the *proper* address.

g. Correct Abbreviations to Use

When entering change of address information, use the following abbreviations for street designations:

Designation	Correct Abbreviation
Alley	ALY
Avenue	AVE
Bend	BND
Boulevard	BLVD
Circle	CIR
Court	CT
Cove	CV
Drive	DR
Lane	LN
Place	PL
Road	RD
Street	ST
Terrace	TER
Trail	TRL
Lane	LN

Note: Failure to use the above abbreviations will result in the creation of write-outs and will delay the processing of the address change.

13. Non-Receipt of Payment Procedures

Introduction This topic contains information on how to process requests for non-receipt of payments, including:

- ways to report non-receipt of a check
 - procedure to determine if tracer action is appropriate
 - initiating tracer action on paper checks if notified via telephone
 - initiating tracer action on paper checks if notified via personal walk-in
 - procedures for action on direct deposit
 - receiving multiple payments
 - timeline for issuing a replacement check, and
 - RO responsibilities.
-

Change Date Initial content load September 2012

a. Ways to Report Non-Receipt of Check There are four ways a person may report non-receipt of a check:

- by telephone (*Note:* Completion of [VA Form 21-0820d, Report of Non-Receipt of Payment](#), is required in this case)
 - walk-in interview (*Note:* Completion of [VA Form 21-4138, Statement in Support of Claim](#), is required in this case)
 - by mail, or
 - via IRIS.
-

b. Procedure to Determine if Tracer Action is Appropriate Take the following steps to determine if tracer action is appropriate (for both paper checks and direct deposits):

Step	Action
1	Properly identify the identity and address of the caller.

Continued on next page

13. Non-Receipt of Payment Procedures, Continued

b. Procedure to Determine if Tracer Action is Appropriate
(continued)

Step	Action						
2	Review payment history in Share to verify that payment was issued.						
3	Verify that the payee is entitled to the payment.						
4	Review payment history in Share to see if payment was returned <table border="1" style="width: 100%; margin-top: 10px;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="text-align: center;">If payment has been returned ...</th> <th style="text-align: center;">If payment has not been returned ...</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td style="vertical-align: top;">under Reason Code 1, a change of address will release payment as long as the record is <i>NOT</i> suspended.</td> <td style="vertical-align: top;">verify that a minimum of three mail delivery days have passed since date of payment. Notes: • Monthly recurring payments are released to the post office <i>in advance of the pay date</i> and should be delivered to the payee address on the actual pay date. • One-time and retro payments are released from U.S. Treasury (Austin, TX) <i>on the pay date</i> and take approximately three mailing days for delivery. </td> </tr> <tr> <td style="vertical-align: top;">award action is required if the record is suspended.</td> <td style="vertical-align: top;">Note: In some instances processing a CADD will resume the benefits and will release the proceeds on the account.</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	If payment has been returned ...	If payment has not been returned ...	under Reason Code 1, a change of address will release payment as long as the record is <i>NOT</i> suspended.	verify that a minimum of three mail delivery days have passed since date of payment. Notes: • Monthly recurring payments are released to the post office <i>in advance of the pay date</i> and should be delivered to the payee address on the actual pay date. • One-time and retro payments are released from U.S. Treasury (Austin, TX) <i>on the pay date</i> and take approximately three mailing days for delivery.	award action is required if the record is suspended.	Note: In some instances processing a CADD will resume the benefits and will release the proceeds on the account.
If payment has been returned ...	If payment has not been returned ...						
under Reason Code 1, a change of address will release payment as long as the record is <i>NOT</i> suspended.	verify that a minimum of three mail delivery days have passed since date of payment. Notes: • Monthly recurring payments are released to the post office <i>in advance of the pay date</i> and should be delivered to the payee address on the actual pay date. • One-time and retro payments are released from U.S. Treasury (Austin, TX) <i>on the pay date</i> and take approximately three mailing days for delivery.						
award action is required if the record is suspended.	Note: In some instances processing a CADD will resume the benefits and will release the proceeds on the account.						

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13. Non-Receipt of Payment Procedures, Continued

c. Initiating Tracer Action on Paper Checks if Notified via Telephone

Take the following steps to initiate tracer action if notification is made via the telephone:

Step	Action
1	Advise payee only one check is payable. If payee receives two checks, one check must be returned to: Department of Treasury, Financial Management Service, P. O. Box 115, Philadelphia, PA 19105
2	Complete VA Form 21-0820d for non-receipt and ensure you indicate on form whether the lost or stolen check had been endorsed.
3	Send VA Form 21-0820d to Finance Activity via the Public Contact Team (PCT) mailbox (example: Denver RO PCT mailbox – VAVBADEN/RO/PCTC) for action. mailbox)

d. Initiating Tracer Action on Paper Checks if Notified via Personal Walk-In

Take the following steps to initiate tracer action if notification is made via a personal walk-in:

Step	Action
1	Have payee complete VA Form 21-4138 or the Intake Specialist or Veterans Service Representative should complete VA Form 21-0820d
2	Ensure payee has indicated whether lost or stolen check was endorsed.
3	Send VA Form 21-4138 to Finance Activity to take corrective action and send the payee a notification letter.

Note: If notification is made via mail, send the mail to Finance Activity for appropriate corrective action.

e. Procedures for Action on Direct Deposit

If notification of non-receipt of a direct deposit payment is made via a telephone call:

- complete [VA Form 21-0820d](#), and
- forward it to the PCTC mailbox for corrective action.

Continued on next page

13. Non-Receipt of Payment Procedures, Continued

e. Procedures for Action on Direct Deposit
(continued)

If notification of non-receipt of a direct deposit payment is made via a personal walk-in:

- complete [VA Form 21-4138](#), and
- forward it to the Finance Activity for corrective action.

If notification is made via mail, send the mail to Finance for appropriate corrective action.

f. Receiving Multiple Payments

Ensure that you inform the payee that only one payment is payable. If the payee receives both the original and replacement payment, one of the payments must be returned to the Department of Treasury, Financial Management Services, P.O. Box 51320, Philadelphia, PA 19115-6320.

g. Timeline for Issuing a Replacement Check

The table below shows the timeline for issuing a replacement check after the tracer action has been submitted.

If the ...	Then the U.S. Treasury will ...
original check was <i>not</i> cashed	send a replacement check within two weeks.
original check <i>was</i> cashed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • send the payee a <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – copy of the original check, and – claim form, and • inform the payee that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – upon receipt of the claim form, the Treasury will review and determine if check will be reissued, and – the process could take up to six weeks.
original check is more than one year old	take no action until the payee's written claim is received. Then forward the claim to Finance for correction action and processing.

Continued on next page

13. Non-Receipt of Payment Procedures, Continued

**h. RO
Responsibilities
Concerning VA
Benefit
Payments**

VA regional offices are responsible for providing *all* responses to VA beneficiaries concerning VA benefit payments. Under *no* circumstances will beneficiaries be referred to the Hines' Finance Center or to the U.S. Treasury for assistance.

14. Releasing Information From a Rating Decision or Award Letter

Introduction This topic contains guidance on releasing information to claimants regarding a recent rating decision and/or award letter:

Change Date Initial content load September 2012

a. General Information on Releasing Decision or Award Information On occasion, VBA receives inquiries from claimants who indicate that their claim has been completed, but they have not received their notification letter/rating decision and want to know the decision that has been made.

This occasionally occurs when the claimant's POA notifies him/her that a decision was made prior to VA mailing the award letter and rating decision, or the documents have not yet been delivered by the post office.

b. Policy on Releasing Information From a Rating Decision or Award Letter

Until the claimant receives and thoroughly reads the notification letter and decision, we should not discuss the details of what was decided. The letter and rating decision provide detailed information as to the decision and the reasons and bases for that decision. In addition, the letter also includes the claimant's appeal rights.

The letter should answer most, if not all, potential questions. If after thoroughly reading the letter and decision the claimant has any questions, please suggest that the claimant call back.

Note: There are differences in how we handle these types of calls when the address is correct versus incorrect. (See Guidance in block 14.c).

c. General Guidance on Releasing Information From a Rating Decision or Award Letter

The following general guidance is provided to deal with these types of inquiries:

- Verify that an award letter and/or rating decision has been completed
 - Check the date of the completed end product
 - Verify the claimant's address
 - Provide a minimum of 10 mailing days (14 calendar days) for the receipt of the notification letter.
-

Continued on next page

14. Releasing Information From a Rating Decision or Award Letter, Continued

d. Action Required for Releasing Information From a Rating Decision or Award Letter

You should take the following action when the inquirer understands a recent decision has been made and wants to know the actual decision (or during the call when this information is provided when the caller requests a status of his/her claim):

Step	Action
1	Acknowledge a decision has been made (if applicable)
2	Verify claimant's address: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• If incorrect – Perform Change of Address (after completing all required ID protocol)• Resend the letter/decision
3	Provide the date of the award letter
4	Provide explanation to the claimant (as indicated in following section)

e. Providing an Explanation

After completing the steps as outlined above, you should provide an explanation to the claimant as follows:

- If mailed to *correct* address, advise the caller:

“Our records show that a decision has been made on your claim and a notification letter was sent to you on (provide date) to the address you provided. This letter will provide you with our actual decision and specific information on the reasons and bases for that decision. Because the letter will provide you with this information to include your appeal rights, please review the entire letter and decision. If you have any questions or need additional information, please feel free to call us back.”

Continued on next page

14. Releasing Information From a Rating Decision or Award Letter, Continued

e. Providing an Explanation
(continued)

- If mailed to an *incorrect* address, advise the caller:

“Our records show that a decision has been made on your claim and a notification letter was sent to you on (provide date) to your old address. Since you indicate you no longer reside at this address, we have changed the address in our system and will resend the decision to your new address. Please allow 10 mailing days (14 calendar days) to receive this information.

This letter will provide you with our actual decision and specific information on the reasons and bases for that decision. Because the letter will provide you with this information to include your appeal rights, please review the entire letter and decision. If you have any questions or need additional information, please feel free to call us back.”

In the caller is persistent on being told the decision, you should apologize and politely state that due to appeal rights issues, we are unable to do so. The caller must receive the letter officially in the mail first, and then we would be able to answer his/her questions.

15. Identification Protocol

Introduction This topic contains information on:

- privacy protected information
- blocked or restricted telephone numbers
- how to identify a blocked or restricted telephone number
- action if caller is calling from a blocked or restricted telephone number
- basic identification protocol
- additional required identification protocol for changes of address and/or direct deposit accounts
- verification of responses, and
- dealing with callers who fail to meet identification protocol

Change Date Initial content load September 2012

a. Privacy Protected Information As VBA employees, we are all responsible for ensuring the protection and safeguarding of our Veterans' and beneficiaries' private information.

Failure to follow the safeguards VA has implemented to protect our beneficiaries' records may result in disciplinary action including termination or criminal prosecution resulting in fines and/or incarceration.

b. Blocked or Restricted Telephone Numbers PCRs are required to ensure that callers requesting a Change of Address and/or Change of Direct Deposit Information are not calling us from a blocked or restricted telephone number.

In order to meet our responsibilities in this scenario, PCRs need to verify that the display on their telephone is showing a valid number for each Change of Address and/or Change of Direct Deposit Information call they receive.

c. How to Identify a Blocked or Restricted Telephone Number If a caller is calling from a restricted or blocked telephone number, the Caller ID readout on your telephone will show one of the following:

- all zeros
- "restricted" or "number restricted"
- "blocked"
- no telephone number

Continued on next page

15. Identification Protocol, Continued

d. Action if Caller is Calling From a Blocked or Restricted Telephone Number

If you identify that the caller is calling from a restricted or blocked number, you must advise the caller of the new requirement and offer the option of a call back or for the individual to contact us back from an unrestricted number.

A suggested script is listed below:

“I see you are calling from a restricted or private phone line. For security purposes, may I call you back at an unrestricted number or would you like to call us back from an unrestricted phone line?”

If the caller indicates they would prefer to be called back:

- ask the caller for the unrestricted telephone number
- complete the call back to the appropriate number
- complete the ID protocol requirements
- process the appropriate update, and
- record the callback number and action taken into MAP-D.

If the caller indicates they would prefer to call back from an unrestricted number:

- use the following script:
 - “Thank you for your understanding of our security procedures, please give us a call back at your earliest convenience and we will be glad to assist you.”

e. Basic Identification Protocol

Once it is determined that the caller is entitled to receive privacy protected information, you must ask the following questions:

All Callers
• Veteran’s Claim or Social Security Number
• Veteran’s Full Name
• Branch of Service

Continued on next page

15. Identification Protocol, Continued

e. Basic Identification Protocol
(continued)

Note: Further questions may be asked if you are not comfortable with the above responses. You *must* verify all responses in the system.

These questions must be asked of the caller in *every* instance.

f. Change of Address and/or Direct Deposit Requests

In addition to the basic identification protocol, the following additional questions *must* be asked and verified to process a change of address and/or direct deposit:

Change of Address and/or New Direct Deposit	Change of Direct Deposit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address of Record 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Account Number of Record
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current Check Amount (exact dollar amount) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current Check Amount (exact dollar amount)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Date of Birth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Date of Birth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verify caller is Calling from an Unrestricted or Unblocked Telephone Number 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verify caller is Calling from an Unrestricted or Unblocked Telephone Number

Note: It is not necessary to ask for the current check amount if the caller has not received a first recurring payment.

g. Verification of Responses

You *must* verify the responses to the identification protocol questions in the system.

If you are uncomfortable with the responses provided by the caller, additional questions may/should be asked. Some examples of additional questions:

- Name of Spouse or Children
- Date of Marriage or Divorce
- Dates of Military Service

While you may ask additional questions, you may *not* substitute any of the primary questions discussed above if the caller is unable to provide the correct response.

Continued on next page

15. Identification Protocol, Continued

h. Failure to Meet Protocol

In the event you cannot comfortably identify the caller, apologize for not being able to change the address and/or direct deposit over the telephone. Provide the caller with the following options:

- Option 1:
 - If the caller is a Veteran, ask if he/she has a Premium Account on eBenefits:
 - If the Veteran states he/she has a Premium Account, advise the Veteran that the change can be processed online using their eBenefits account.
 - If the Veteran states he does not have a Premium Account, advise the Veteran of the benefits of having an eBenefits account and provide enrollment options
 - Option 2:
 - Provide [VA Form 20-572, Request for Change of Address/Cancellation of Direct Deposit](#), or [VA Form 24-0296, Direct Deposit Enrollment Form](#), with any written instructions needed to complete the forms.
 - Instruct the caller to return the forms to the office of jurisdiction and provide the address.
-

i. Identification Protocol Hints

If the caller is unsure, provide helpful hints about information he/she should have readily available. Some examples of helpful hints include:

- Have you received a decision or letter from us recently that may contain the information that would help you answer the questions?
 - Do you have access to a recent bank statement?
-

j. Identification Protocol Reminders

Powers of attorney (POA, VSO, and CVSO) and VA assigned payees (Fiduciary, Guardian, and Custodian) are considered first-party callers and must be asked the same questions.

Verify POAs in BIRLS/Corp Record and using the OGC Accreditation Website on the PCR Index.

16. Business Rules for Generating a Veterans Assistance Inquiry (VAI)

Introduction This topic provides the business rules and guidelines for Public Contact Representatives (PCRs) and Legal Administrative Specialists (LASs) who work in Public Contact Teams, National Call Centers, National Pension Call Center, or the Inquiry and Routing Information System (IRIS) Response Center on specific instances when a Veterans Assistance Inquiry (VAI) should be taken.

Change Date Initial content load September 2012

a. Background on Veterans Assistance Inquiries (VAIs) The initiation of VAIs is an integral part of the PCR's and LAS's responsibilities, and one that is subject to evaluation via quality assurance review programs for telephone and electronic correspondence utilizing the Inquiry Routing and Information System (IRIS).

The use of these business rules will result in a standardized approach that will:

- promote consistency among the various call centers,
 - provide guidance to assist the PCR/LAS in determining when initiation of a VAI is appropriate, and
 - ensure a fair and proper evaluation process for both IRIS and telephone quality reviews.
-

b. Business Rules For Generating a VAI These business rules provide guidance for the PCR and LAS to initiate a VAI.

These rules are not all inclusive and do not cover all situations where a VAI would be appropriate. However, these business rules provide guidance for the most common situations facing the PCR. Changes to these rules will be incorporated, as needed, in order to meet future VBA strategic goals.

These business rules also provide management with evaluation parameters, as reflected within the quality assurance review programs, for telephone and electronic correspondence.

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16. Business Rules for Generating a Veterans Assistance Inquiry (VAI), Continued

c. Importance of MAP-D Records

The MAP-D record is one of the primary tools the PCR has to obtain information relative to an active claim. The need for accurate MAP-D records is of paramount importance and cannot be overemphasized.

When these records are not updated throughout the claims process, the PCR's ability to provide relevant, timely, and accurate information to our callers is significantly reduced.

Maintaining accurate tracked items and status information supports VBA's strategic goals of processing claims efficiently and improving customer service. Claimants will have a better understanding of the development process and be more willing to contribute to its resolution when VBA provides reliable status information.

The use of these business rules will ensure that our records are updated timely and accurately.

d. VAI References

The following hyperlinks are provided as references to the Inquiry and Routing Information System (IRIS) and VAIs:

- [IRIS Instruction Guides](#)
 - M27-1, Part I, Chapter 6
-

e. General Procedures for Generating a VAI

Business rules are provided for responding to caller questions on:

- Brokered Claims
 - Claims Control/Share
 - Claims in an Open Status
 - MAP-D Records Not Updated
 - Claims in a Rating Status
 - Claims Pending Authorization
 - Death Pension Claims
 - Burial Claims
 - General Dependency Claims
 - Pension End Products
-

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16. Business Rules for Generating a Veterans Assistance Inquiry (VAI), Continued

e. General Procedures for Generating a VAI (continued)

If a PCR cannot answer an inquiry (by phone or IRIS), he/she will initiate a VAI based on these rules. As previously stated, these rules are not all-inclusive and do not cover every possible scenario.

In all cases where there is a question as to the appropriateness of the initiation of a VAI, PCRs should seek their supervisor's guidance.

f. Brokered Claims

If a claim has been brokered, VAIs should only be sent to the station of jurisdiction (SOJ), and **not** to the brokered station. The SOJ will maintain responsibility for the VAI response.

PCRs will identify the SOJ using MAP-D. If a claim has been temporarily transferred, they will use the SOJ that existed prior to the temporary transfer.

g. Consolidated Claims

For consolidated claims (i.e., pension claims), if after a thorough review of all available systems (Share, MAP-D, etc.), there is inadequate information to answer an inquiry, a VAI should be forwarded to the appropriate SOJ or PMC for reply.

h. Claims Control/Share

If the caller alleges he/she submitted a claim, but no pending claim exists in Share (and after review of MAP-D notes, Virtual VA, and the "Claims/Denials" screen in the Corporate record):

- A VAI should be initiated when there is no claim pending in Share **21 days** (or more) after the claim was submitted by the claimant. In addition, a [VA Form 21-0820, Report of General Information](#), should be completed to secure the date of claim.

Note: This includes *both* rating and non-rating issues.

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16. Business Rules for Generating a Veterans Assistance Inquiry (VAI), Continued

i. Claims in an “Open” Status For claims showing as “Open” in MAP-D, the following table should be used to determine the VAI initiation time frames to be used for the following end product series (110, 010, 020, 140, 120, 180, and 190).

These timelines do *not* apply to appeal or other issues:

Status	Initiate VAI when...
Claims Control/SHARE	21 days (or more) have elapsed from date claim sent
Open, Awaiting Initial Development (No tracked items)	The claim is awaiting initial development and the claim has been in this status for more than 10 days after the Regional Office Average Days Awaiting Development
Open, with tracked items	Inactivity for 60 days or more AND the claim has been in this status 10 days longer than Regional Office pending claims timeliness for open status All Evidence Closed/Received for the last 60 days AND the claim has been in this status 10 days longer than Regional Office pending claims timeliness for open status

j. MAP-D Records Not Updated

A VAI shall be initiated in the following situations for end product series 110, 010, 020, 140, 120, 180, 190. This rule does **not** apply to appeals or other issues:

- When suspense reason reflects “exam” but no tracked item is reflected in MAP-D or there is no information in CAPRI (or MES or Examtrack) to reflect an exam request
- Caller indicates evidence was submitted, but receipt of evidence is not reflected in the tracked items or in the “Evidence” tab of MAP-D.
(*Important: This rule applies if it has been 75 days since the evidence was submitted.*)

k. Claims Awaiting Decision or Promulgation

For claims awaiting decision or promulgation, the following table should be used to determine the initiation dates to be used. This rule applies to end product series 110, 010, 020, 140, 120, 180, 190 *only* and **not** to appeals or other issues.

Claim Status	Initiate VAI after...
Awaiting Decision, Ready for Decision (RFD), Secondary Ready for Decision (SRFD), Rating Incomplete (RI), or Rating Correction (RC)	20 days after the Regional Office timeliness for claims in these phases
Awaiting Promulgation, Rating Decision Complete (RDC), Authorized, Pending Authorization, Pending Concur, Returned by Other User, Self Returned	10 days after the Regional Office timeliness for claims in these phases
Appeals, NOD and Form 9	Inactivity for 60 days or more AND the claim has been in this status 100 days longer than Regional Office pending NOD timeliness Inactivity for 60 days or more AND the claim has been in this status 100 days longer than Regional Office pending Form 9 timeliness

l. Claims Pending Authorization

For claims not at a PMC pending authorization:

- VAI should be initiated for any claim pending authorization **10 days** (or more) after the Regional Office timeliness.

For claims pending authorization at the Pension Maintenance Centers (PMCs) - Philadelphia, Milwaukee and St. Paul:

- VAI should be initiated for any claim pending authorization for **20 days** (or more) after the Regional Office timeliness.

Note: This includes *both* rating and non-rating issues.

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16. Business Rules for Generating a Veterans Assistance Inquiry (VAI), Continued

m. Burial Claims or General Dependency Claims (End Products: 160, 130)

A VAI should be initiated for these claims that have been inactive for 60 days or more **AND** the claim has been in this status 10 days longer than Regional Office pending claims timeliness for open status .

n. Pension Maintenance End Products (End Products: 137, 150, 155, 154, 157, 167, 297)

A VAI should be initiated for these claims that have been inactive for 60 days or more **AND** the claim has been in this status 10 days longer than the PMC pending claims timeliness for open status.

o. Quick Reference on VAI Initiation

Access this link: [VAI Initiation Business Rules Quick Reference Guide](#) to view the business rules document via the [PCR Toolbox](#) on the Benefits Assistance Service website.

17. Decision Review Officer (DRO) Elections via Telephone

Introduction This topic provides guidance on claimant’s election of a DRO review via a telephone call.

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a. Information on DRO Elections During the appeals process, a letter is provided to the claimant, which specifically states the issues with which the claimant disagreed and allows the claimant to select how he/she wants the Notice of Disagreement (NOD) reviewed.

The claimant can elect a Decision Review Officer (DRO) review or a traditional review. A claimant has **60 days** from the date of his/her election letter to choose a DRO review. This 60-day time frame *cannot* be extended. If a response is received after 60 days have passed or no response is received, the NOD will be reviewed under the traditional process.

b. Accepting a DRO Election via Telephone Normally, a claimant will make his/her review election in writing. However, there is no prohibition for the claimant making the election via the telephone.

In the event you receive a telephone call where the claimant requests to make his/her election via phone, you should:

- perform the ID Protocol procedures to properly identify/verify the claimant’s identity
- document the election on [VA Form 21-0820, Report of General Information](#), ensuring you document the *full* content of the claimant’s communication

Important: It is critical that the date of the telephone contact is documented on the [VA Form 21-0820, Report of General Information](#).
