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# VA Takes Significant Step in Improving Correspondence With Veterans

**WASHINGTON** — As part of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) ongoing improvement of managing taxpayer dollars, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) has deployed the Centralized Benefits Communications Management Program (CBCM) nationally.

The program represents a new centralized printing and mailing process system designed to improve productivity and streamline correspondence with Veterans on compensation benefits and pension burial claims.

“CBCM is one of many great examples of how VA continually explores ways to update outdated processes,” said Acting VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “With this program, we took proven industry practices and adapted them to our needs.”

Prior to CBCM, which went into effect March 23, VBA's 56 regional offices were responsible individually for their manual processing of outbound mail.

Under CBCM, claims processors across the country now submit letters electronically to one central location for printing and distribution — allowing specialized employees to focus more time and energy assessing Veteran claims.

In addition to improving productivity, CBCM also will help reduce maintenance requirements of hundreds of regional office printers, reduce the likelihood of returned mail through additional address verification and enhance the security and privacy of Veteran information through minimized handling of mail.

Over the past five years, VA has improved the way it processes compensation and pension claims enabling the development of CBCM. In the future, VA will enhance CBCM's design to improve further VBA's methods of communication with Veterans by allowing them to choose between paper or digital correspondence. For more information or questions about CBCM, email [VAPublicAffairs@va.gov](mailto:VAPublicAffairs@va.gov).

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# VA Announces Changes to Improve Delivery of Specialty Rehabilitation and Prosthetic Services

**WASHINGTON** — With a commitment to ensure Veterans receive quicker access to specialty rehabilitation services and equipment, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) recently implemented a rapid response team to expand staffing and training, increase communication directly with Veterans and improve processes to reduce and eliminate the backlog of pending requests for prosthetic items and services.

To improve Veterans' access to specialty rehabilitation services, enrolled patients at VA medical centers can now schedule appointments directly with amputation care and wheelchair clinics, without having to first see a primary care provider.

This means Veterans will not have to make an extra appointment and travel to a VA facility for a referral. Direct scheduling is currently available at 137 VA facilities for amputation care and at 124 VA facilities for wheelchair clinics.

Additionally, same-day access for orthotist/prosthetist clinical services is available at 141 VA facilities.

“The dedication and support of the multidisciplinary team of VA employees who are implementing these improvements demonstrate their commitment to do the right thing for our Veterans,” said Robert Wilkie, Acting Secretary of Veterans Affairs. “We are focused on implementing the best solutions to modernize how we deliver rehabilitation and prosthetic services across all VA medical centers — ensuring Veterans nationwide are receiving timely and integrated health care and support.”

As the largest and most comprehensive provider of prosthetic devices and sensory aids in the country, VA Prosthetics and Sensory Aids Service currently averages 638,000 new requests monthly across its health-care system for such items. The service provides a full range of equipment and services to Veterans, including artificial limbs and bracing, wheeled mobility and seating systems, sensory-neural aids (e.g., hearing aids, eyeglasses), implants and devices surgically placed in the Veteran (e.g., hips and pacemakers), and home respiratory care.

VA is working to ensure Veterans are receiving their medical items, equipment and supplies sooner. Since June 2017, the total number of requests for prosthetic items pending for more than 30 days has been reduced by 72 percent.

As VA continues to look for modern, simple ways to improve care for America's Veterans, additional process improvements for prosthetic and specialty rehabilitation services will be fully implemented at all VA medical centers in 2018.

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## **VA and U.S. Digital Service Launch New Web Tool to Help Veterans Track their Benefits Appeals**

**WASHINGTON** — Today the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the U.S. Digital Service announced their launch of an improved Appeals Status tool to increase transparency and enable Veterans to track the progress of their benefits claims appeals. "It's important that our Veterans have the opportunity to track their appeals process in a timely and efficient manner," said VA Secretary David Shulkin. "For the first time ever, Veterans can see their place on the Board of Veterans' Appeals' docket, including the number of appeals that are ahead of them."

The tool, which went live March 21 on VA's Vets.gov website, will allow Veterans to access detailed information about the status of their benefits appeals and will include alerts about needed actions, as well as estimates of how long each step of the process takes.

Some Veterans who have previewed the new tool said it had given them hope and helped them understand that the process might take longer than expected.

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## **Discharge Review Boards**

Are you a veteran who needs to change, correct, or modify your discharge or dismissal? If you qualify and take the proper steps you can apply for a review of discharge and possibly have it changed.

Each of the military services maintains a discharge review board with authority to change, correct or modify discharges or dismissals that are not issued by a sentence of a general courts-martial. The board has no authority to address medical discharges. The veteran or, if the veteran is deceased or incompetent, the surviving spouse, next of kin or legal representative may apply for a review of discharge by writing to the military

department concerned, using DoD Form 293. This form may also be obtained at a VA regional office, from veterans organizations. However, if the discharge was more than 15 years ago, a veteran must petition the appropriate service Board for Correction of Military Records using DoD Form 149, which is discussed in the “Correction of Military Records” above. A discharge review is conducted by a review of an applicant’s record and, if requested, by a hearing before the board.

Discharges awarded as a result of a continuous period of unauthorized absence in excess of 180 days make persons ineligible for VA benefits regardless of action taken by discharge review boards, unless VA determines there were compelling circumstances for the absence. Boards for the correction of military records also may consider such cases.

Veterans with disabilities incurred or aggravated during active military service may qualify for medical or related benefits regardless of separation and characterization of service. Veterans separated administratively under other than honorable conditions may request that their discharge be reviewed for possible recharacterization, provided they file their appeal within 15 years of the date of separation. Questions regarding the review of a discharge should be addressed to the appropriate discharge review board at the address listed on DoD Form 293.

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**Official VA Statement**  
**“Alleged Tainted Anthrax Vaccine and 100% Compensation”**  
**April 18, 2018**

**Issue:** VA is aware of recent social media postings regarding a tasking order dated, April 10, 2018, from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Air Defense Artillery Regiment, Department of the Army. This tasking order, which concerned allegedly tainted lots of the anthrax vaccine and the possibility that VA may grant 100 percent compensation due to these vaccines, has been rescinded by tasking order dated April 17, 2018, from the Department of Army.

**VA Message:**

- VA has confirmed with the Department of Defense (DoD) that the information from tasking order dated April 10, 2018, is inaccurate and was not founded on a legitimate order from higher authorities.
- VA does not have a policy to grant 100 percent service-connected disability compensation based on the alleged “tainted” anthrax vaccines.
- While DoD indicated there were legitimate concerns in the early 2000’s regarding anthrax vaccines, subsequent research dispelled any notion that the vaccines were tainted or that there was a connection between the anthrax vaccine and any chronic disease.
- VA disability benefits are granted for health conditions incurred in or caused by military service. The level of disability is based on how a service-connected condition impacts daily life. The potential side effects of vaccines, including anthrax, are generally mild and temporary. While the risk of serious harm is extremely small, there is a remote chance of a vaccine causing serious injury or death. In those rare cases, VA disability or death benefits may be granted.
- If you have other vaccine-related health concerns, you may contact DoD at 1-877-438-8222, press Option 1. See also: [www.health.mil/vaccines](http://www.health.mil/vaccines)
- If you have questions about disability compensation, the web link to the U.S. Veterans Benefits Administration is at: <https://benefits.va.gov/benefits/>, or you may call 1-800-827-1000.