

BVS POC REPORT - BENEFITS

1. **Date of Report:** June 20, 2024
2. **BVS POC(s):** Carl Bedell, Carlton Kent, Scott Davidson
3. **Service Area/Program:** Benefits
4. **DVS Director/Program Manager:** Michele Watson Crone
5. **Mission of service area/program (i.e. what does it do?):** Advocate for Virginia veterans and their families by connecting them to the benefits and services they have earned by providing accurate, timely and ethical education and assistance. Primarily develop claims to be submitted to the Department of Veteran Affairs.
6. **Who does the service area/program serve (i.e. who are the customers)?** Virginia Veterans and their family members who are seeking federal, state, and local benefits and services.
7. **What are the service line's primary objectives?**
 - a. For FY24 our primary objective is increasing depth of claims and customer service through retention of Veterans Services Representatives. We are seeking to increase salaries of key veteran service employees by 9% to promote the retention of a highly trained and professional staff. This is specifically outlined in the Veterans Strategic Plan Workgroup Report (VSPWR) (Jan 2024) action item 4.2.
 - b. For FY24 we will implement virtual and digital technologies to increase service capacity across the state and improve our customer experience.
 - c. For FY24 we will improve our customer-service related training and develop internal customer service incentives to build a world class customer service experience.
 - d. For FY24 we will improve customer-facing employee skillsets through the development of a codified training syllabus, utilization of professional development courses to develop and train highly professional, knowledgeable and efficient representatives.
8. **What are the key results / accomplishments from the past fiscal year.**
 - a. Benefits averaged 1335 new veteran contacts per month for FY24 – 2% short of the key result, but an 8% increase over the prior FY.
 - b. Veteran Outreach in TAP classes. The federal government created a new process for TAP participation by outside agencies during FY24, providing access to TAP on a first come basis. As a result, our VSRs can access TAP classes to brief active duty military members. Additionally, management and reporting on agency TAP participation was shifted to the DVS Veteran Education Transition and Employment service line in early FY24.
 - c. Benefits averaged 1716 claims per month and we forecast to submit 20,593 claims by the end of the FY. A decrease of 7% from FY23.
 - d. *Achieve over 300 hours of outreach per month:* Benefits averaged 162 hours of outreach per month in FY24. This does not include routine claims work accomplished at 49 offsite locations away from our 38 established offices. The shortfall in outreach this FY is directly related to the same issues which impacted our claims production: employee turnover and reduced efficiency of appointment-centric operations.
 - e. *Submit 217 BDD claims per month (2604 per year):* Benefits averaged 185 BDD claims per month and is on track to submit 2221 BDD claims for FY24 –7% below the prior FY.

- f. *Screen 100% of new clients for suicide prevention:* Benefits screened 98.6% of new clients for suicide prevention in FY24.
- g. Establish a virtual customer contact center (to improve efficiency in customer contacts): Funding for the Virtual Contact Center (VCC) was not approved in the FY25 budget. However, a scaled down version of the VCC was developed and is expected to launch the first month of FY25.
- h. Use and modify the VESA interface to enable lower traffic offices to virtually assist higher traffic offices via Teams/Zoom and to digitally refer clients across service lines utilizing the Gold Standard Digital Hub interface: VESA virtual services interface was launched in April 2024. See question 11.

9. What trends are you seeing from data pertaining to your service line?

- a. Client use of deployed technology has been well received and grown exponentially. The Veteran Engagement and Scheduling Application developed in FY23 resulted in over 14,500 appointments in the first year after deployment.

10. What type of outreach did the service line conduct and what are the results?

- a. Benefits maintained 4 regional Facebook pages with monthly posts throughout FY24.
- b. Benefits participated in regular community outreach across our office locations in addition to focused corporate outreach events for Veterans Day, Memorial Day and several other high-profile events.
- c. Benefits established new partnerships with:
 - a. James Madison University
 - b. Arlington VFW
- d. Benefits maintained regular visit schedules to 49 offsite work locations across the state.
- e. Benefits established new offsite work locations at 6 locations.
- f. Benefits personnel support events as requested by senior leadership and delegates.

11. What, if any, new initiatives / innovative solutions were launched during the past year?

- a. Individual Objectives and Key Results (IOKRs): In late FY23, Benefits began the development of Individual Objectives and Key Results and completed them in early FY24. IOKRs provide individual measures of performance for Veteran Service Representatives by capturing and measuring productivity relating to the services we provide our clients. IOKRs differ from simply measuring claims numbers in that they account for the complexity and time required for the various types of services we provide, and also for the VSR availability (leave, illness, training etc.). The end result was an efficiency rating for each VSR which, after review by leadership to exclude poor performance or other factors, enabled data-driven decisions on corporate productive capacity. Essentially, we can see exactly where we have capacity and where VSRs are overworked, enabling us to make decisions to maximize resources and be more efficient. The use of this data is explained in several innovations below.
- b. Internal Realignments: In FY24, we used IOKR data to identify offices and positions with lower productivity, and offices with high-demand face-to-face services. As VSR positions became vacant, we reviewed the office and employee history in light of the IOKR data and determined if that position should remain at the same location, be shifted elsewhere, or be swapped with part time positions elsewhere. In total, the service line was able to maximize resources across 5 offices in FY24, providing more efficient coverage for in-person services.

- c. **Virtual Services:** In FY24, we fundamentally changed how we serve customers across the state by using our online appointment tool developed in FY23 to allow veterans to self-book Zoom video appointments with offices outside their immediate location in lieu of waiting for an appointment in their local office. Through programming updates to our Veteran Engagement and Scheduling Application (VESA) software, we offered video services to all customers. Moreover, we used IOKR data to identify which VSRs have service capacity and redirected the additional video appointments to those offices - maximizing resources and reducing customer wait time. For example: a customer may wait 4-5 weeks for an in-person appointment at the Richmond VAMC office, when there are next day appointments available in offices on the other side of the state. Using zoom, integrated into VESA, we are able to offer appointments in those offices to the customer, thereby reducing their wait time dramatically.
- d. **Virginia Veterans Network (VVN) / Gold Standard Digital Hub:** The agency launched VVN in May of 2024 with Benefits services integrated into the platform. The Benefits service line helped define and create an entirely new customer interface webpage for our services and for partner organizations which will be launched in coming weeks. This page will integrate the partner portal, VESA, and the new Veteran Information Management System software being procured by several other service lines, and provide a streamlined, modern interface for customers. We will also be launching a separate brand-new customer interface page focused on self-service education and information in areas relating to our services, such as *Know the claims process*, *What if your claim is denied*, *Where to get your DD-214 or medical records*, and various how-to videos or information sheets. Both customer interfaces will provide redirects to Federal VA and our VVN partner organizations.
- e. **Flexible Work Schedules:** In FY24, the Benefits service line piloted extended customer service hours in several offices over a period of several months. The intent was to offer services to customers before or after their workday. It also sought to offer our employees the option to start early and end early as a benefit to them. By offsetting individual VSR work hours, we were able to offer services beginning at 7:00am through the end of the normal workday while keeping normal 8-hour days for our staff. The results of the pilot showed an 80% utilization rate of the early morning hours particularly at Quantico MCB. Extended hours were adopted for that location and we planning to expand the pilot to other locations in FY25.
- f. **Internet and Technology Upgrades:** Over the course of FY24, the Benefits service line has upgraded 25 of 36 offices, and partially upgraded another 8, installing upgraded internet service on the COV network, increasing our cybersecurity protection while also improving the internet speeds in rural offices. We have also upgraded 22 offices with softphones and e-fax capabilities, reducing IT costs, while gaining data reporting on certain services.

12. What are the biggest challenges facing the service area / program at present?

- a. **Loss of experienced and trained employees to jobs with higher pay and more benefits.** In FY24, Benefits once again experienced historic turnover in positions. We changed out 37% of our total workforce and 43% of our customer facing workforce in the first 11 months of FY24. Some of the turnover results from internal career growth opportunities. The result of

this turnover is an inexperienced workforce. As of June, 2024, 67% of our customer facing workforce has less than 2 years' experience. Inflation, higher costs of living and much higher salaries and remote working opportunities offered by the Federal VA for comparable jobs all contribute to this problem, with a majority of departing employees citing better pay and opportunities as the primary reason for leaving. Given that it takes upwards of 6-8 months to train a new Veteran Service Representative, the loss of each employee strains our remaining employees, exacerbating the problem. The agency once again took additional budgetary risk this year, by identifying several non-essential budget cuts that could be sustained in future years (in-person training and the annual conference). These savings were used to fund ~5% retention salary increases in line with our retention plan. Unfortunately, these increases still fall 9% short of the salary targets identified in the 2022 Gallagher salary study, and the agency cannot afford to sustain additional raises. New funding for salary increases continue to be our #1 priority. This is also the Benefits one and only action item in our DVS Strategic Plan (Veterans Strategic Plan Working Group Report, Jan 2024): *Action 4.2: General Assembly approves a budget increase for salaries for Veteran Service Representatives (VSRs) to support retention of VSRs.*

- b. Office Security. During the end of FY23 and all of FY24, Benefits experienced a marked increase in aggression from our customers. The service line has an increase in escalated customer behavior that are in violation of state policies (verbal abuse, threats against our employees or offices etc.). In response to this issue, the service line introduced a number of new security and safety initiatives including: training all our staff quarterly on Verbal Judo (de-escalation techniques); training crisis response coordinators; establishing a contract for on-call security services for when a threat exists (used once this year already). We also conducted 100% onsite physical security reviews in May of 2024 with the intent of improving physical security and are in the process of procuring protective film and increased door/entry security for multiple offices based on assessed threat.

13. How does delivering the service/program help Virginia's veterans?

Financially, emotionally and full-service access to all DVS service lines.

14. By helping the veteran, how does it help the Commonwealth?

Benefits assists Virginia's veterans and transitioning service members in applying for compensation, pension and other benefits claims with the Federal VA. Approval of a claim results in monetary monthly payments, which translates to more dollars spent in the economy as well as more sales tax revenue for state and local government. The increased financial assistance through the granted claims directly contributes to a veteran's ability to "Thrive" in Virginia. Furthermore, with each new veteran or transitioning service member encounter, we screen for suicide risk and interview for referrals to all DVS service lines ensuring they have access to all the Benefits that Virginia has to offer – further enabling them to "Thrive" while also influencing their decision to "Stay". Finally, Virginia's Transitioning Service Members are also briefed, both formally and informally, during Transition Assistance Program session briefings, Benefits Delivery at Discharge claims briefings and events in and around military installations. In these formats, they learn valuable information about Virginia and the benefits offered. Working with them early and often increases the chance they will "Stay" in Virginia.

15. What strategic opportunities are there for the future?

Continue to find and integrate technology to centralize and streamline customer access points to services, such that person-to-person interactions are conducted as efficiently and productively as possible. We are still seeking implementation and integration of a Virtual Customer Service phone system with Virtual assistant and Artificial Intelligence technology to answer basic questions and provide basic information before a person is engaged. We are still pursuing digital sharing of information between service lines. We are continuing to work toward innovations which maximize our resources and personnel, given a flat budget and personnel authorization. We have added a goal of creating a world class customer service experience – elevating our already very high customer feedback ratings. Each of these improvements are intended to enable us to serve more veterans and provide better service, enabling them to Stay, Work and Thrive in the Commonwealth.

16. What else do you want the Board to know about this service area?

- a. The service line shift to appointment centric operations was mandated for FY24. At that time, we predicted a decline in claims numbers and an increase in wait time due to the loss of walk-in traffic and recommended against it. This risk was accepted by leadership in the interest of providing maximum appointment availability to clients. In May 2024, after seeing the actual impact on claims numbers, and receiving negative client feedback on this concept, we initiated a shift back to a hybrid (appointments plus walk-ins) model.