

BVS POC Report

Benefit Services

1. Date of Report: September 16, 2020
2. BVS POC(s): Carl Bedell
3. Service Area/Program: Benefit Services
4. VDVS Director/Program Manager: Donna Williams
5. Mission of service area/program (i.e. what does it do?): The Virginia Department of Veterans Services advocates for Virginia veterans and connects them to benefits and services they have earned.
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. How is the service/program delivered? VDVS operates 34 benefit service offices across the commonwealth. All services are provided free of charge.
8. How does delivering the service/program help Virginia's veterans? VDVS Benefits assists veterans in obtaining health benefits, disability compensation, VA pensions, survivor benefits, and appeals.
9. By helping the veteran, how does it help the Commonwealth? VDVS services helps the Commonwealth by ensuring Virginia veterans receive the benefits they are entitled to. In many cases, these benefits are fiscal. In Fiscal Year 2019, Virginia veterans received over \$3.85 billion in federal benefits.
10. What is the statutory authority for the service area/program?

State: Code of Virginia, Title 2.2. Administration of Government, Chapter 20

Federal: 38USC 501a

11. Where do the resources for the service area/program come from (general fund, non-general fund, donations, etc.?)

VDVS Benefits is funded through the general fund. The FY 2020 budget for Veteran Benefit Services is \$8.8M.

12. How has COVID-19 impacted the delivery of services? What service adaptations have been made or are planned?

August 6, 2020

Due to COVID-19, VDVS closed all benefits office in March 2020. In June, VDVS began a phased reopening of Benefits offices and is currently operating under a hybrid model which provides services both face to face (in office) and virtually. This model is designed to have Veteran Service Representatives conduct face to face appointments with veterans three days per week, while conducting virtual appointments with veterans two days per week. During these appointments, the representatives are developing and submitting claims and related documents electronically to the VA via the Center of Excellence (COE). The COE conducts quality reviews of the documents before forwarding the claim to the VA. Although traditional outreach is limited due to no large gatherings, Benefits is currently using every outreach tool at its disposal to inform the veterans that we are open for business.

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

There are two challenges: (1) the unknown outcome of possible budget cuts; and (2) Moving from a very robust office model to a hybrid model. There are many benefits to the hybrid model but the transition is challenging during the pandemic. Benefit application submittal rates unsurprisingly fell during the office closures and bringing the office contact and submittal rate back to where it was prior to the COVID pandemic will be a challenge. The Benefits Offices are working on an “appointment only” schedule for safety concerns and, in some cases, have been forced to close due to COVID exposure. This has affected the customer rate at the open benefit offices, where it is still below the pre-pandemic numbers. The Benefits team continues to work to address these challenges but it is difficult with the uncertain personnel schedules resulting from staff illnesses, COVID exposure that require quarantine, some staff are considered high-risk, and other necessary COVID-related accommodations.

14. What strategic opportunities are there for the future?

This hybrid state of service offerings is allowing VDVS benefits to expand a “virtual model” of doing business. This virtual model removes geographic barriers to access the Benefits offices and provides the opportunity for the Benefits staff to reach and support larger numbers of Veterans across the Commonwealth.

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

Staff salary levels remain significantly below comparable positions in other State agencies and Veteran service organizations. This is an ongoing issue that affects retention and morale within VDVS Benefits. The effects of staff turn-over include significant operational efficiency loss.