

ELDER LAW UPDATE

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VA Help Lines Found to Regularly Provide Wrong Information

By: Chris Adams Posted on Friday December 30, 2005 Reprinted with permission. Knight Ridder Newspaper

WASHINGTON - A veteran who turns to the Department of Veterans Affairs for information about benefits might want to get a second opinion.

According to the VA's own data, people who call the agency's regional offices for help and advice are more likely to receive completely wrong answers than completely right ones.

To see how well its employees answer typical questions from the public, VA benefits experts in 2004 called each of the agency's U.S. regional offices, which process veterans' disability claims. The so-called mystery callers, saying they were relatives or friends of veterans inquiring about possible benefits, made a total of 1,089 calls. Almost half the time they got answers that the VA said were either completely incorrect or minimally correct.

According to an internal VA memo on the mystery-caller program that's buried deep in the department's Web site, 22 percent of the answers the callers got were "completely incorrect," 23 percent were "minimally correct" and 20 percent were "partially correct." Nineteen percent of the answers were "completely correct," and 16 percent were "mostly correct."

The program also found that some VA workers were dismissive of some callers and unhelpful or rude to others. One caller, for example, said, "My father served in Vietnam in 1961 and 1962. Is there a way he can find out if he was exposed to Agent Orange?" The VA's response, according to the VA memo: "He should know if they were spreading that chemical out then. He would be the only one to know. OK (hung up laughing)."

The memo said the response was "completely incorrect" because it gave no information - and also was "rude and unprofessional."

The 2004 survey found improvements in some categories compared with a similar study with identical questions in 2002. Timeliness improved, but scores on "willingness to help" and "courtesy/professionalism" dropped. VA workers also used "too much jargon," confusing to many veterans, the memo said.

VA officials acknowledge that the agency needs to do better. Daniel Cooper, the department's top benefits official, said in a memo to the VA regional offices that the results of the mystery-caller program "are below expectations and are disappointing to the organization. ... We must be able to provide prompt service and give correct answers with the courtesy and professionalism that our customers deserve."

This week, VA officials said they'd taken steps since 2004 to improve their performance, among other things setting up a small pilot program to monitor employees silently as they answered veterans' questions. While the VA said the pilot program improved performance, thus far it's been used in only four out of 57 regional offices. Other offices are scheduled to begin the silent monitoring by the end of fiscal 2006. Beyond that, the VA said it was working to improve its service by boosting training and using role-playing exercises for some phone calls with the public. Other quality-improvement programs are expected to be put into place in 2006 and 2007.

Veterans across the country said their experience with VA call centers suggested that there was still significant room for improvement. "The VA needs a change of attitude," said William B. Jones, a veteran from Greenville, S.C., who's been butting heads with the agency for several years. Jones, a semi-retired physician, said he'd received bad medical information and repeatedly had gotten the runaround in his attempt to get compensation for ailments that he said were linked to his military service.

"I often get no answer at all," said Jones. "I call their 1-800 numbers and generally you get a computer and talk to no one. I've had that not once but probably a dozen times. When you do talk to somebody, you get frustrated because you can't really find out if the case is proceeding. They say they are working on it, but they don't give any details."

Responding to Jones' complaints, the VA said it "takes very seriously any frustrations veterans may experience when attempting to contact us. ... VA continues to work on ways to provide better access and quality customer service."

The mystery callers also judged the courtesy, willingness to help and promptness of the people who answered the VA's phones. They found that many VA offices were helpful and friendly - even as they provided bum information.

Bum information, however, is the biggest problem. One mystery caller, for example, asked about benefits after a Vietnam veteran died of lung cancer. Many conditions have been linked to the herbicide Agent Orange, which was widely used in Vietnam. But the VA regional office said lung cancer was "not one of the conditions related to Agent Orange."

According to the VA's evaluation, that answer was "completely incorrect (wrong information given - lung cancer is one of the conditions related to Agent Orange.)"

Another mystery caller asked about a grandfather who'd been injured in the Korean War. "When he dies, is he eligible for burial in Arlington National Cemetery?" the caller asked.

Response: "I can't answer for Arlington. You can call your congressmen. They love doing those kinds of things for their constituents."

The VA's evaluation: "Completely incorrect. ... Unprofessional; unwilling to help."

Another mystery caller asked whether her husband could get help from the VA for a back problem he'd had for years. "I don't know," the VA regional

office said. "He just has to file a claim."

The evaluator found that the response was completely incorrect because it didn't give an answer, and the VA official was "discourteous" and "unwilling to help."

Source: VA memo on "2004 Mystery Caller" program

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