

**TELEPHONE DEVELOPMENT AND CUSTOMER SERVICE SKILLS
TRAINEE HANDOUT**

REFERENCES

- 38 CFR 3.159(e) VA's duty to assist claimants in obtaining evidence
- 38 CFR 3.217(b) Submission of statements or information affecting entitlement to benefits
- M21-1MR I.1.C.6.c Requirement to Follow Up on Requests for Non-Federal Records by Telephone
- M21-1MR I.1.C.6.e Using the Telephone, Fax, or E-mail to Obtain Evidence From the Claimant
- M21-1MR, II.2.2 – Providing Information to a Third Party
- M21-1MR II.3 – Telephone Interviews
- M21-1MR, III, iii.1.B.2.c Using E-Mail, Fax, and Telephone
- M21-1MR, III.iii.1.B.2.d Documenting Information Received by Telephone
- M21-1MR, III.iii.1.B.2.e Handling Information Received by Telephone That May Adversely Affect Benefits
- M21-1MR III.iii.2.I.59.e Contacting the Claimant
- M21-1MR III.iii.2.K.79.a – Contacting State Adjutants General Offices
- FL 08-18 Final Rule: Notice and Assistance Requirements and Technical Correction
- FL 10-49, VA Form 21-0845 Authorization to Disclose Personal Information to a Third Party
- FL 12-04, Revised Procedures for Telephone Contact and Development

TOPIC 1: TELEPHONE DEVELOPMENT

Suitable Evidence

VSRs can use a telephone contact to solicit or verify essential information. This method is recommended when only a few pieces of information or evidence are required and can easily be obtained by telephone.

Understanding the types of evidence that may be obtained by telephone is important. A list of issues suitable for this method of development is available in M21-1MR, III, iii.1.B.2.c

Evidence suitable for telephone development includes:

- Social Security numbers of dependents, including the Social Security Number Verification Match
- Mailing address(es)
- Direct deposit information
- Date(s) of birth
- Reserve or National Guard unit information (e.g., addresses)
- Information concerning retired, severance, or readjustment pay

Telephone Development Requirements

M21-1MR I.1.C.6.c Requirement to Follow Up on Requests for Non-Federal Records by Telephone is shown below.

The requirements to follow up on requests for non-federal records by telephone are as follows:

- When following up on requests for non-federal records, you must make one attempt to contact the records custodian by telephone.
- If the records custodian cannot be reached by telephone on the first attempt:
 - Make no further attempts to contact the custodian by telephone
 - Document the attempted telephone call in MAP-D
 - Send the custodian a follow-up letter to request the records

Fax Records

Whenever appropriate, ask the custodian of the records to fax the records to the designated RO fax number. (*Note:* The fax machine must be located in a secure, nonpublic location because the faxed records may contain personally identifiable information.)

Follow-Up When Service Records are Unavailable

M21-1MR III.iii.2.I.59.e Contacting the Claimant requirements are shown below.

When service records are unavailable, do the following:

1. Contact the claimant by telephone after the VSCM or designee signs the formal finding of record unavailability.
2. Advise the claimant:
 - About the lack of a response from the records custodian(s)
 - Of the requirement that he/she submit any relevant documents in his/her possession
 - That a decision will be made based on the evidence of record if the requested evidence is not received with ten days from the date notice is given

Document the results of the telephone contact on VA Form 27-0820, or if telephone contact is not made, provide written notification of this information to the claimant. The ten-day time limit for reply will be based on the date of this letter.

More information about formal finding of record unavailability is found in M21-1MR III.iii.2.I

Fast Letter 12-04 Revised Procedures for Telephone Contact and Development

The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) continues to pursue and implement initiatives to improve customer service and expedite claims processing.

Upon expiration of a suspense date, stations should attempt telephone contact with the claimant and/or other providers of information s (e.g., private physicians, Reserve/Guard units, etc.) if doing so might help bring the claim closer to resolution.

In cases where a telephone call could resolve an issue that would otherwise result in a deferred rating decision, station management may choose to ask Rating Veterans Service Representatives (RVSRs) to initiate telephone contact rather than delaying a decision.

When employees are successful in making telephone contact, they must continue to summarize the call on VA Form 27-0820, *Report of General Information*, according to instructions in M21-1MR, III.iii.1.B.2.e. However, the Compensation Service no longer requires completion of VA Form 27-0820 to document *unsuccessful* attempts to make telephone contact. Nevertheless, the employee who made the attempt is still responsible for documenting the action in MAP-D notes.

When undertaking telephone development, employees may leave a message for a claimant as voice mail or with a third party. However, the message must not include any information that is protected by the Privacy Act. The employee should simply leave VA's toll-free number (1-800-827-1000) and ask for a return call. After doing so, the employee must immediately enter a detailed note in MAP-D regarding the information or evidence he/she is seeking, so the national call center can respond to any returned call. At a minimum, each contact note an employee leaves in MAP-D in connection with these procedures must include the following:

- Name of the individual/facility contacted
- Specific evidence requested

The Compensation Service encourages stations to incorporate telephone development into their individual workload management plans.

MAP-D Notes

To ensure MAP-D compliance and for the NCCs to help individuals with call backs, it is imperative that MAP-D is updated with the following information in MAP-D notes:

- Person contacted
- Reason contacted
- Specific evidence requested

If the call is unsuccessful, do not document this outcome on VA Form 27-0820, Report of General Information, instead, only document information when the Veteran and/or desired contact is reached.

Target Your Telephone Development

1. National Guard State Adjutants General Office
 - Refer to [M21-1MR III.iii.2.K.79.a](#) – Contacting State Adjutants General Offices
 - Contact the State Adjutants General’s military records department to inquire about faxing your request. Verify fax number and response time.
2. Military Treatment Facilities
 - Contact the “Release of Information Office” at the Military Treatment Facility and obtain the fax number to process requests for military medical records.
3. Contact the claimant when you will need to clarify a claimed condition. For example, a Veteran claims knee arthritis. The VSR can contact the Veteran by telephone to clarify which knee he/she is claiming arthritis in.
4. Contact the claimant to retrieve missing information on a claim or form. For example, The VA Form 21-526 is missing information pertaining to dependents. The VSR can contact the Veteran to obtain the address.
5. Private Medical Records with completed VA Form 21-4142:
 - Call the contact information to obtain a fax number
 - Ask what the turn-around time is and set suspense dates accordingly

The timeliness of claims processing decreases dramatically with constant use of Telephone Development.

38 CFR 3.217(b) Contact Requirements

If conducting a telephone contact, appropriate procedures must be followed.

38 CFR 3.217(b) states:

“VA may take action affecting entitlement to benefits based on oral or written information or statements provided to VA by a beneficiary or his or her fiduciary, unless specifically provided otherwise. However, VA may not take action based on oral information or statements unless the VA employee receiving the information meets the following conditions:

During the conversation in which the information or statement is provided, the VA employee must:

1. Identify yourself as a VA employee who is authorized to receive the information or statement;
2. Verify the identity of the provider as either the beneficiary or his or her fiduciary by obtaining specific information about the beneficiary. This information needs to be verified from the beneficiary's VA records, such as Social Security number (SSN), date of birth, branch of military service, dates of military service, or other information; and
3. Inform the provider that the information or statement will be used for the purpose of calculating benefit amounts.”

Contact Procedures

Based on 38 CFR 3.217(b) Submission of statements or information affecting entitlement to benefits: use the following procedures when making a telephone contact:

1. Begin the call with an appropriate greeting.
 - Identify yourself by name.
 - State that you are a VA employee with the appropriate regional office.
 - Affirm you are authorized to receive the information or statement and state purpose of the call.
2. Verify the identity of the person.
 - Verify you are speaking to either the Veteran or beneficiary, or his or her fiduciary.
 - *Obtain specific information about the Veteran or beneficiary that can be verified from VA records, including SSN, date of birth, branch of military service, dates of military service, and address.
 - Terminate the call if the person to whom you are speaking is not able to furnish the information requested, or you remain uncertain of the person's identify, and complete a development letter.
3. Obtain the information you are seeking.
4. Close the call.
 - 1) Use finishing phrases.
 - 2) Summarize.
 - 3) Ask, “Is there anything I can help you with today?”
 - 4) Sign off with “good-bye,” or a similar appropriate word or phrase.
 - 5) Let the caller disconnect first.

*It is appropriate to ask for the last four numbers of their Social Security number instead of the entire number.

If leaving a contact number, always give the VA toll free number (1-800-827-1000). The VSR should TAKE PRECAUTION before considering giving out his or her direct number. Some VA Employees are required to contact Veterans in certain VA programs such as Women's Veterans Coordinators, Military Service Coordinators, POW Coordinators and OEF/OIF Managers.

Special Circumstances

While conducting a telephone contact, the following circumstances could arise:

- Claimant cannot be reached
- Document(s) need to be emailed or faxed
- Information received results in adverse action

Claimant Cannot be Reached

If the claimant cannot be reached, complete the following procedures:

1. Leave a message with contact information (do not include details about what information is needed):
 - A greeting
 - Your name
 - Your employer
 - VA toll-free number (800) 827-1000
2. Update MAP-D notes. List the information needed from the claimant followed by:
 - Your name
 - The date of your attempted contact
 - Your station number.

This step is necessary in case the Veteran or beneficiary calls another telephone number instead of the number you provided.

Update MAP-D notes if you reach the claimant, but a callback is needed.

Suitable for Email or Fax

All documents, except separation documents intended for proof of service to establish entitlement to benefits may be accepted by email or fax.

When accepting document by email or fax follow these procedures:

- Print all information received by email from the claimant or beneficiary and place in the claims folder.
- Verify the source. Exercise sound discretion when requesting information by telephone or email to ensure that the source of the information is reliable.
- Request the original if there is any question about the validity of any document received by email or fax.

When information received by telephone, email, or fax results in an award or denial action, include a statement of the award or denial as well as the date of the telephone call, email, or fax in the notification letter.

Adverse Action

VA may increase or decrease benefit payments based on information submitted orally, by email, fax, or other electronic means.

If a change results in adverse action:

- A pre-determination notice is not required, as long as the Veteran or beneficiary was notified **at the time of the telephone call that benefits would be affected.**
- The file is documented that the Veteran or beneficiary was notified that benefits would be affected by the information provided.

The VA cannot take adverse action with contemporaneous notice or favorable action based on oral information unless the specific telephone contact procedures are followed. Guidance on awards resulting in adverse actions is available in the “Due Process” lesson plan.

Adverse action procedures listed above are only true for information about income, net worth, dependency, or marriage. Otherwise, due process is required.

VA Form 27-0820

Following the telephone contact, the VSR must document the beneficiary’s VA records using VA Form 27-0820, Report of General Information (Report of Contact). The following is a list of the available versions of VA Form 27-0820:

- 27-0820: Report of General Information
- 27-0820a: Report of First Notice of Death
- 27-0820b: Report of Nursing Home or Assistant Living Information
- 27-0820c: Report of Defense Finance & Accounting Service (DFAS)
- 27-0820d: Report of Non-Receipt of payment
- 27-0820e: Report of Incarceration
- 27-0820f: Report of Month of Death

Documentation

When using VA Form 27-0820, the following items must be documented:

- Specific information or statement provided
- Date the information or statement was provided
- Identity of the provider
- Steps taken to verify the identity of the provider as being either the beneficiary or his or her fiduciary
- Verification that employee informed the provider that the information would be used for the purpose of calculating benefit amounts

Specific guidelines about documentation requirements when using VA Form 27-0820 can be found in 38 CFR 3.217(b) and M21-1MR, III.iii.1.B.2.d.

Additional Guidance

When completing VA Form 27-0820, if the:

- Information required to properly document the call is not included on the VA Form 27-0820 and filed in the claims file; no action can be taken on the evidence received. If due process is required, then a letter must be sent. Also, if the file is not properly documented a development letter must be sent.
- Beneficiary has a power of attorney (POA), a copy of VA Form 27-0820, Report of General Information must be sent to his or her representative.

- Information received by telephone results in award or denial action, the notification letter reference the information received by telephone and include the date of telephone contact and the name of the person who provided the information.

VA Form 21-0845

VA Form 21-0845, Authorization to Disclose Personal Information to a Third Party allows National Call Centers (NCCs) and Regional Offices (ROs) to release specified information normally protected under privacy provisions to family members or other designated persons who are not powers of attorney, agents, or fiduciaries.

Additional Information

To understand the purpose of VA Form 21-0845, the VSR must also know that the form:

- Was amended to inform incompetent beneficiaries (including those with supervised direct pay) that they cannot submit the form over their own signature. If incompetent beneficiaries submit the form, a letter explaining that VA cannot accept the form unless his or her fiduciary signs it needs to be sent. The fiduciary is also responsible for revoking the authorization.
- Includes information that is limited and unlimited (e.g., the status of claims, benefit information, payment history, payment rate, debt owed VA, or any other information specified by the authorizer).
- Allows designated individuals to provide certain information to VA (e.g., such as changes in address or direct deposit accounts). Designated persons must correctly answer a security question chosen by the claimant or beneficiary to confirm their authorization.
- May only have one designated person or organization. In addition, only one form may be valid at a time. If a new form is received, revoke the prior authorization.

Procedures

When completing VA Form 21-8145, the VSR should adhere to the following procedures:

1. If the form is not sufficiently complete and legible to authorize access, return it. Mark with a red check each incomplete section and explain in a letter what blocks need completion. In MAP-D notes add “VA Form 21-0845 returned MM/DD/YY for completion.”
2. When the form is complete, the designated RO employee will update Share with the flash, Third Party Release, and include the following statement in MAP-D notes: “VA Form 21-0845 of record received MM/DD/YY for (add name of authorized person and their relationship to beneficiary/claimant).” If the authorizer selected a limited time frame for the authorization, also include, “VA Form 21-0845 expires on MM/DD/YYYY.”
3. After entering the information into MAP-D notes and adding the flash in Share, the designated person will go into Virtual VA to determine if there is an e-folder. If there is no e-folder, establish one.

If the RO is incapable of scanning the documents directly into Virtual VA, they will fax them to the Capture Unit in St. Paul at 612-970-5488.

Revoking the Authorization

Upon written receipt of a revocation:

- Add to MAP-D notes “VA Form 21-0845 dated MM/DD/YY for (add name & relationship) is revoked effective MM/DD/YYYY.”
- Remove the flash in Share. The effective date is the date of receipt of the revocation.

Upon telephone or in-person receipt of a revocation:

- Document on a VA Form 27-0820, Report of General Information.
- Upload into Virtual VA using the Insert Doc functionality with the fields completed as noted above.
- Add the revocation note as stated above into MAP-D.

Any subsequent authorization must be made using a dated and signed VA Form 21-0845.

Third-party Authorization

If someone claims to have third-party authorization:

1. Verify authorization using Virtual VA.
2. Solicit their identity and ask the security question.
3. If the caller responds correctly, proceed with the standard protocol to identify the beneficiary or claimant.
4. If the individual does not know the answer to the security question, inform him/her that he/she does not have the proper authorization. If the individual persists, refer him/her to the beneficiary/claimant.
5. Review the authorization carefully.
6. Note what type of information is permitted for release and the expiration date of the authorization, if any.

Polite Phrases

During the call, remember your manners and be polite. Remember the communication skills you were taught. At the point, if you forget your manners, you have lost control of the conversation. Never argue with the caller.

Use phrases like:

- Excuse me.
- I don't mean to interrupt, but....
- I'm sorry.
- Please.
- Thank you. You are welcome. (The appropriate response when someone thanks you is "You are welcome." or "No problem.")

ATTACHMENT A: TELEPHONE CONTACT DOCUMENTATION EXERCISE

Imagine you are Jenny Jones, the VSR who initiated the telephone contact in **Attachment A: Telephone Contact Exercise**. Now that the call is complete, VA Form 27-0820, Report of General Information (Report of Contact) needs to be completed.

Use the following background information to complete **Attachment B: VA Form 27-0820**:

- Jenny Jones works in the Atlanta VA Regional Office Veterans Services Division. Her assigned duties is to contact Veterans who have recently been reported on the Social Security Matching Program as name and social security number do not match.
- The case you have is Veteran Samuel B. Adams, SS xxx-xx-xxxx.
- His home phone number is 404-222-3344.
- His address is: 121 Martin Luther King DR SW, Atlanta, GA 30303-3559.
- His spouse is: Roberta, SS xxx-xx-xxxx.
- His daughter is: Jennifer, SS xxx-xx-xxxx.

ATTACHMENT B: VA FORM 27-0820

OMB Control No. 2900--0734
Respondent Burden: minutes

Department of Veterans Affairs		REPORT OF GENERAL INFORMATION	
NOTE - This form must be filled out in ink or on a typewriter or computer, as it becomes a permanent record in the veteran's folder.		1. VA OFFICE	2. IDENTIFICATION NUMBERS (C, XC, SS, XSS, V, K, etc.)
3. LAST NAME - FIRST NAME - MIDDLE NAME OF VETERAN (<i>Type or print</i>)		4. DATE OF CONTACT (<i>Month, day, year</i>)	
5. ADDRESS OF VETERAN (<i>Include number and street or rural route, city or P.O., State and ZIP Code</i>)		6A. TELEPHONE NUMBER OF VETERAN (<i>Include Area Code</i>)	
		DAY	EVENING
		6B. E-MAIL ADDRESS (<i>If applicable</i>)	
7. NAME OF PERSON CONTACTED		8. TYPE OF CONTACT <input type="checkbox"/> PERSONAL <input type="checkbox"/> TELEPHONE	
9. ADDRESS OF PERSON CONTACTED		10. TELEPHONE NUMBER OF PERSON CONTACTED (<i>Include Area Code</i>)	
<input type="checkbox"/> I certify that I properly identified my caller using the ID Protocol			
11. BRIEF STATEMENT OF INFORMATION REQUESTED AND GIVEN:			
Notification of Action <input type="checkbox"/> I read the following statement to the caller: "I am a VA employee who is authorized to receive or request evidentiary information or statements that may result in a change in your VA benefits. The primary purpose for gathering this information or statement is to make an eligibility determination. It is subject to verification through computer matching programs with other agencies." cc: POA (<i>If applicable</i>):			
DIVISION OR SECTION		EXECUTED BY (<i>Signature and title</i>)	

PRIVACY ACT NOTICE: The VA will not disclose information collected on this form to any source other than what has been authorized under the Privacy Act of 1974 or Title 5, Code of Federal Regulations 1.576 for routine uses (i.e., civil or criminal law enforcement, congressional communications, epidemiological or research studies, the collection of money owed to the United States, litigation in which the United States is a party or has an interest, the administration of VA programs and delivery of VA benefits, verification of identity and status, and personnel administration) as identified in the VA system of records, 58VA/21/22/28 Compensation, Pension, Education and Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Records - VA, published in the Federal Register. Your obligation to respond is required to obtain or retain benefits. The responses you submit are considered confidential (38 U.S.C. 5701). Information submitted is subject to verification through computer matching programs with other agencies.

RESPONDENT BURDEN: We need this information to obtain evidence in support of your claim for benefits (38 U.S.C. 501(a) and (b)). Title 38, United States Code, allows us to ask for this information. We estimate that you will need an average of 5 minutes to respond to the questions on this form. VA cannot conduct or sponsor a collection of information unless a valid OMB control number is displayed. Valid OMB control numbers can be located on the OMB Internet Page at www.whitehouse.gov/omb/library/OMBINV.VA.EPA.html#VA. If desired, you can call

1-800-827-1000 to get information on where to send comments or suggestions about this form.