

KEY ELEMENTS OF VHA'S VETERAN CUSTOMER SERVICE PROGRAM

1. **PURPOSE:** This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Handbook outlines the procedures for establishing a comprehensive Veteran Customer Service Program.
2. **MAJOR CHANGES:** This is a new issuance that emphasizes the six required elements of a comprehensive Veteran Customer Service Program.
3. **RELATED ISSUES:** VHA Directive 1003.
4. **FOLLOW-UP RESPONSIBILITY:** The Office of the Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Operations and Management (10N) is responsible for the content of this Handbook. Questions may be referred to the Director, National Veteran Service and Advocacy Program at 518-626-5673.
5. **RESCISSIONS:** None.
6. **RECERTIFICATION:** This VHA Directive is scheduled for recertification on or before the last working day of August 2008.

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Under Secretary for Health

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KEY ELEMENTS OF VHA'S VETERAN CUSTOMER SERVICE PROGRAM

1. PURPOSE

This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Handbook outlines the procedures for establishing a comprehensive Veteran Customer Service Program, and emphasizes the six required elements.

2. BACKGROUND

a. VHA is committed to providing world-class service to veterans within a patient-focused culture.

b. VHA embraces the Baldrige Health Care Criteria for Performance Excellence, the Joint Commission for Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations Standards, and the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities Standards. These criteria support a planned approach to patient, family, and employee satisfaction.

c. Service Recovery (SR) is a key component of organizations that excel in service to their customers. It is a process that identifies service failures, effectively resolves the customer problem, classifies its root cause(s), and yields data that can be integrated with other sources of performance measurement to assess and improve the service system.

d. The establishment of a comprehensive Veteran Customer Service Program is consistent with the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA's) Vision 2020 strategic objective to improve patient satisfaction with their VA health care and the VHA strategy to implement a SR Program.

3. SCOPE

a. All Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) and facility Directors must provide a clearly defined Veteran Customer Service vision and demonstrate their commitment to the provision of excellent Veteran Customer Service, SR, and Patient Advocacy by support and acknowledgement in multiple forums.

b. Each VISN Director and facility Director must ensure that a Veteran Customer Service Program is integrated into strategic planning processes and continuous performance improvement activities. These programs must have measurable goals and actions with identified responsibilities, resources, and timelines.

c. Each VISN Director and facility Director is accountable for implementation of an effective Veteran Customer Service Program and must support this program with time, resources, and enthusiasm. They are to hold all their staff accountable for excellence in the delivery of services to veterans within a patient-focused culture.

d. VISN Directors must ensure that all component sites maintain an effective infrastructure that supports the implementation of the Veteran Customer Service Program and demonstrate measurable outcome improvements. **NOTE:** *Models may include VISN Veteran Service Councils and/or local facility Councils.*

4. COMMUNICATION

The VISN Director is responsible for ensuring that the:

a. VISN Veteran Customer Service Program includes a strong communications component, linking the entire organization and conveying information among staff and between patients and staff.

b. Communications need to include: copies of the “Vision” and Veteran Health Care Service Standards, Patient Advocate data, feedback from patients, and actions to improve systems and patient satisfaction.

5. SERVICE RECOVERY

Each VISN Director is responsible for ensuring that SR as a component of the Veteran Customer Service Program is implemented. **NOTE:** *VHA Handbook 1003.2 provides guidance and knowledge on all aspects of SR.*

6. PATIENT ADVOCACY

a. Each facility Director is responsible for implementing a Patient Advocacy Program that meets the requirements of the most recent version of VHA Directive 1050.2, Patient Advocacy.

b. Each VISN Director must ensure that their component sites establish a way to capture, track, and trend compliments and complaints, particularly those that are resolved at the front line or service level. **NOTE:** *Use of the National Patient Advocate computerized tracking package for those complaints is strongly recommended to ensure a unified approach for tracking data that provides opportunities to identify system-wide improvements.*

c. Patient Advocate Program activities and Veteran Customer Service Program activities must include collaboration and sharing of data and trends between one another and between services and/or organizational units.

7. INFORMATION AND ANALYSIS OF VETERAN SATISFACTION

Veteran Customer Service Programs, at all levels, must utilize a systematic process for collecting and evaluating veteran satisfaction information.

a. Targeted actions are to be taken based on the results from the Performance Analysis Center for Excellence (PACE) and Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients (SHEP) surveys, Patient Advocate Complaint and/or Compliment data, and waiting times data. VISNs and facilities are to utilize this data in strategic planning and veteran satisfaction initiatives.

b. Veteran satisfaction must be measured at the local level, including patient waits and staff courtesy, through a variety of mechanisms. The following methods may be considered:

(1) Interviews.

(2) Focus groups.

(3) Mystery shoppers.

(4) Surveys.

(5) PULSE toolkit.

(6) Comment cards following prescribed guidelines in VA Handbook 6310.2, Collections of Information Procedures.

c. Waiting times data produced under the auspices of the VHA Advanced Clinic Access initiative must be used as one of the measures in the Veteran Customer Service Programs.

d. On-going analysis and feedback of data and results must occur. Follow-up actions to address problems and trends are to be an integral part of the measurement, analysis, and reporting process.

(5) Implementation of “Best Practices” is expected.

8. STAFF FOCUS

a. **Staff Recruitment.** Performance-based interviewing is recommended to ensure the hiring of staff members with competencies that focus on meeting or exceeding Veterans Health Care Service Standards.

b. **Performance Standards.** Veteran Customer Service behavior expectations must be included in each Title V staff member’s Performance Standards.

c. **Education and Empowerment.** Employee training, empowerment, and an understanding of the Veteran Customer Service vision are essential components of a successful program and must be part of an overall VISN education program for Veteran Customer Service to include SR. *NOTE: Employees have higher levels of job satisfaction when they are educated about service and are empowered to deal effectively with service issues.*

d. **Rewards and Recognition.** VISN and facility Directors are responsible for ensuring that reward and recognition systems in VISNs and their component facilities are aligned to support the Veteran Customer Service Program.

9. RESOURCES

- a. Veterans Health Care Service Standards:
<http://vaww.vsscportal.med.va.gov/PatientAdvocate/Documents/Customer%20Service/SvcStdsDirective.doc>.
- b. Veteran Satisfaction and Service Recovery Commitment:
<http://vaww.va.gov/publ/direc/health/infolet/102000001.htm>.
- c. VHA Directive 1050.2, Patient Advocacy Program, June 12, 2000.
- d. Veteran-Customer Service Sourcebook, produced by VISN Support Service Center (VSSC), Healthcare Analysis and Information Group (HAIG).
- e. VHA Veteran Service and Advocacy web page:
<http://vaww.vsscportal.med.va.gov/patientadvocate/>.
- f. Customer Satisfaction Surveys: VHA PACE web page <http://vaww.oqp.med.va.gov> provides.
- g. The VHA Employee Education System web page: <http://vaww.ees.lrn.va.gov/>,
<http://vaww.va.gov/publ/direc/health/direct/199032.pdf>.
- h. Waiting times data: <http://klfmenu.med.va.gov/>.
- i. VHA Handbook 1003.2.
- j. Performance-Based Interview Questions: <http://www.va.gov/pbi/PBIQuestI-III.htm>,
http://vaww.va.gov/ohrm/Staffing/PBI/PBI_Web.doc.