

## **VA's Open Government Plan: The Top 10 Ideas Received from the Public**

President Obama launched the [<http://www.whitehouse.gov/open>] Open Government Initiative on December 8, 2009, taking the first step in "creating an unprecedented level of openness in Government." The directive requires federal agencies to take [<http://www.va.gov/open>] immediate, specific steps to achieve openness through transparency, participation, and collaboration. In response, the Department of Veterans Affairs created a plan that details the transformative steps of our agency to become transparent, collaborative and participatory.

Participation is the first tenant of openness that we embraced. From February 6, to March 19, 2010, we asked you—Veterans, family members, and concerned public—for your ideas about how VA could become a transparent, participatory and collaborative agency. We are thrilled with the nearly 200 responses and the numerous votes cast for the most popular ideas. The results are cogent, insightful ideas for improvement, vetted by the public, which we shared with our senior leadership.

In response to the suggestions and the votes they received, we have detailed updates on actions sparked by your ideas. The ideas below are the top 10 highest vote getters. We grouped the ideas under subject headings for clarity and consistency in our responses. The number next to the idea is its rank based on the number of votes received. We have also included the number of votes each idea received as well as the author's user ID.

### **Telephone and Call Centers**

#### **Idea #7**

**Author:** gary.julia.lovell

**Total Votes:** 43

**Idea:** VA should set goals and keep records on three aspects of all phone calls. First VA should record the number of calls and amount of time the caller is spending on the phone trying to get help. Second track the amount of time the caller is kept on hold. This should be separate from the total phone time mentioned above. Third keep track of the number of calls where the caller is hung up on after being told to call back at a less busy time. Once you know what your numbers are you can begin to set measurable goals for improvement.

Some suggestions to improve customer services would quickly become visible. I'll list a few.

a. Delete the menu options that refer the customer to the web or other phone numbers. The total phone time should start from the time the VA answers the phone. That way, the stupid references to the web and other phone numbers will be against their time. If we wanted to use the web we would have used the web. We can find the VA home page using any search engine we don't need the phone system referring us to the web or to other phone numbers. These references are a waste of your customer's time and you should care.

- b. Offer a menu button to go straight to a real person right on the main menu. If the caller doesn't need any of the services offered on the menu, but requires personal attention, there should be an option on the main menu to go straight to a real person.
- c. Add a feature to your phone services which allows the caller to leave a message if he has suggestions for improvement.
- d. Add a call back button to your menu so VA can spend their time dialing the phone instead of the Veterans having to make multiple calls hoping to reach someone and being hung up on time after time because they are too busy. At least let me vent my frustrations about being hung up on and leave my number so I'm in line for a return call sometime.

#### **Idea #10**

**Author:** gary.julia.lovell

**Total Votes:** 38

**Idea:** Stop hiding behind busy lines and pick up the phone. I'm being told to call back at a less busy time. The time I'm calling is one of the times they recommend as less busy. Somebody needs to get a handle on the poor phone service at VA.

**Status:** VA currently operates 8 call centers manned by 900 full time employees that receive 27 million calls a year. We are creating a better model for the way calls are answered to eliminate busy signals as well as how employees logs calls and a template to record questions and results of each phone inquiry. Our goal is to create a customer friendly experience for every person reaching out to our call centers. Additionally, we will improve other ways for clients to reach us, such as online self-service and an updated website, to ease the numbers of calls received at our centers and provide you with more access to the information that you need. The suggestions in Idea #7 are excellent and we will attempt to incorporate these best practices into the call center solution we are rolling out.

#### **Self Service**

##### **Idea #1**

**Author:** David Apperson

**Total Votes:** 66

**Idea:** Veterans Affairs could save employee man-hours and stress to Veterans if VA would supply step-by-step instructions to Veterans on how to:

- a. Get the quickest diagnoses and
- b. How to properly file a benefits claim if applicable and
- c. Distribute an emergency check for \$2500 to those who have been diagnosed and it is more likely than not they will receive benefits similar to how citizens were treated after Hurricane Katrina.

This may help some Vets from becoming homeless and help the VA from losing contact with people.

##### **Idea #2**

**Author:** columbus.bryant

**Total Votes:** 60

**Idea:** I think VA needs to have a portal that Veterans could sign in to get copies of VA rating results and other documents in order to save the money of mailing and also if a Veteran loses a copy. They could log in and get the document and print it from home. This would help with printing costs and postage. Being in the paperless world.

### **Idea #3**

**Author:** Jaye

**Total Votes:** 58

**Idea:** As a disabled Veteran having been in the system for more than 20 years, I can definitely relate to the having records lost, duplicate requests, not knowing the status of my claim, and simply the frustrations of waiting. The other week, I ordered a pizza online and was amazed at how intuitive and informative their ordering process was. I wondered with all the technology out there, the monies and time that are wasted throughout the VA process on duplications, waiting for records etc., that if a pizza chain can simplify their ordering process, why VA can't come up with a process that, once a Veteran puts in a claim, the Veteran can track it throughout the entire process. It gives the Veteran a bird's eye view of where and who is working on their claim. It may also serve to spur those working on a claim to handle them as expeditiously as possible by knowing the Veteran is watching.

- a. From the initial request for a disability claim, the Veteran is assigned a unique claim number to his/her claim.
- b. That claim number is the associated reference number for that claim from beginning to end.
- c. The Veteran can check the status of the claim in real-time throughout the entire process.
- d. Veterans can update and add pertinent information to the claim easily and at any point of the process.
- e. VA can correspond with the Veteran to make any particular request from the Veteran or to deliver information to the Veteran.
- f. It saves the environment by saving on paper, duplications, etc.
- g. It saves money that VA can be reinvesting into process infrastructure and manpower to develop and maintain process.
- h. It saves time and allows Veterans to access anytime within the process—which may alleviate some of the anxieties caused by the current system's waiting time. It also will empower the Veteran or his/her designated representative, if at any point they notice anything peculiar within their claims process, they can bring it to someone's attention immediately, making those who process these claims more accountable.
- i. It may make the process more seamless and cut down on receiving contradictory information pertaining to a claim depending on whom you contact within the system regarding a claim.

Bottom line, this would be a system that is more transparent, and streamlining will help many of us deserving Veterans receive the help and benefits we not only deserve, but have earned. And if a pizza chain can get you your pizza more efficiently, there is no DOUBT the government can do the same for its heroes.

### **Idea #4**

**Author:** billy.knight

**Total Votes:** 53

**Idea:** I think VA should have a site where Veterans can go and select to receive their correspondence from VA via email. By doing this, VA could save millions of dollars in office supplies. Right now it takes an average of three days for a piece of mail to get to the Veteran from the day it was placed in the mail system. This would also allow the Veteran to save the file without having to create a paper file. These savings could be put back into the system. Let's see if the average cost per piece of mail is 75 cents and 500,000 people sign up for this program we could save 375 thousand dollars.

#### **Idea #5**

**Author:** peggys1699

**Total Votes:** 49

**Idea:** Add to the My HealthEVet program by allowing Vets to access and obtain copies of all lab work, testing results, and doctor's notes. It would save time for the Vet by not having to wait the 10- 20 days it currently takes to get copies of records. It would save money by not needing postage to mail the records to the Vet. It would cut down on the number of employees needed to work in medical records by enabling Vets to obtain their own record copies.

#### **Idea #6**

**Author:** william.haack

**Total Votes:** 46

**Idea:** When a Veteran submits a claim he/she should be able to go to a site within the VA site that will allow them to check on the status of their claim. By the same token, VA should have milestones built into the system that will require that the VA adjudicator to communicate with the Veteran at preset day markers informing the Vet of the status of the claim. Markers would be at 30-day intervals starting with 60 days. Once the claim reaches 180 days, it would require that a supervisor become involved and a report be made to Secretary of VA. If VA is serious about speeding up claims, this should not be a problem. I understand that some claims are more complicated than others but there is no excuse for routine claims taking as long as they do. Email should be used as extensively as possible to implement this system.

#### **Idea #8**

**Author:** bigrob\_cain

**Total Votes:** 41

**Idea:** VA should have one website where Veterans/beneficiaries can log in and view all of their VA benefit information. This should include status, location, and anticipated completion of claims in progress as well as payment information of benefits currently being received. This resource would eliminate a lot of confusion and aggravation on the part of us Veterans and should reduce the number of inquiries to various VA phone numbers and websites. I, for one, am continually looking for ways to get information and answers to my questions from VA. There is one phone number for Post-9/11 Educational questions, which is useless and is never answered. And there is another question and answer website for Post-9/11 Educational questions which is not much better than the phone number. And yet another set of phone numbers and website/question and answer page for disability compensations, etc. I realize all these

areas may fall under different parts of VA, however, they should all be able to be retrieved from one central location. Currently VA does not do a good job communicating claim status with Veterans.

**Status:** These are outstanding ideas and we are delighted to report that we have solutions to address them. The umbrella project for self-service is called the Veteran's Relationship Management (VRM). VRM will provide capabilities to achieve on demand access to comprehensive VA services and benefits in a consistent, user-centric manner to enhance Veterans, their families and VA employees' experience. The first example of VRM is our partnership with DoD to provide VA's first online single sign-on, self-service web portal. Using your EDIPI, you can log onto <https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/> and check the status of compensation and pension claims, review your payment history, and check home loan eligibility, just to name a few. We continue to enhance the functionality of the system and in July you can access and manage notices, news, secure messages, and email notifications, update your address, and view your Specially Adapted Housing grant information and status. Eventually, when you are signed in to Ebenefits, you will be able to access the enhanced functionality of MyHealthVet to order prescriptions and manage appointments. In addition to the Ebenefits portal, we are redesigning and improving the employees' systems. The Veterans Benefits Management System will provide a paperless processing environment for VSRs and RVSRs. Finally we are working on the "Blue Button" project, a collaboration with HHS and the Markel Foundation that will offer better personal health portability. The Blue Button will give you the opportunity to access your complete personal medical history on demand.

### **Claims Advocate**

#### **Idea #9**

**Author:** burnskp5

**Total Votes:** 40

**Idea:** I worked for the IRS for 32 years. We had an office called Taxpayer Advocate. Their job was to get involved when the normal course of operations of the agency failed. They had broad powers—including the right to intervene at any point in the audit process. They solved a lot of problems by making the system work better. We should have such a process within the Department of Veterans Affairs.

**Status:** Currently, VBA provides 2 primary advocates for Veterans and their families navigating the claims process. First, the Veterans Benefits Counselors, based from VBA Regional Offices, guide Veterans through the claims process and explain benefits eligibility. Also, VBA's new business line, the Benefits Assistance Service (BAS), will focus on advocacy and outreach for Veterans and their families that have issues with their claims or other related claims questions.