

VA



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

# Higher Level Review usability testing January 2020

**Research Readout**

# Goals and method

# Goals

- The *Higher Level Review* (HLR) flow has been tested before, but several changes have been made (some due to technical requirements) since then, so a new round of Usability testing was needed.
- HLR as a product has changed designers several times and their last updates needed to be implemented and tested.
- We wanted to test an Invision prototype of the HLR flow with 8-10 veterans, in order to identify successes, usability issues or pain points.

# Method

- We conducted 9 qualitative interviews (usability studies) between 15 - 22 January 2020.
- These were all task-oriented, semi-structured interviews done remotely via the Zoom app.
- We used this [InVision prototype](#) for our testing, referring to the VA.gov website.

# Participants

- We interviewed 9 users. One participant (P3) was an outlier and was removed from the analysis.
- There was a good spread in age, gender and geographic location between the participants.
- We interviewed 5 female and 4 male.
- All users had submitted a claim before. Several users had done or started a HLR review before.

# Hypotheses and research questions

# Hypotheses

- Certain terms and use of language in the HLR flow may confuse veterans (i.e. legacy appeals, opt-out, etc).
- Opt-out page could potentially alarm users because it is a deliberate and forced action to proceed in submitting the HLR process. (Users need to feel 100% confident that they know all the consequences of this action before moving forward).

# Research questions

- What usability issues remains in the latest HLR flow?
  - Are there any confusing steps in the HLR flow?
    - Are each steps clearly defined or self-explanatory?
  - Does the user organically move from step to step?
  - Does the user needs more information in order to feel confident to move forward?
  - Are there other questions or concerns the user has while completing the HLR process?
- Is there any confusing or ambiguous language in the HLR flow?



# Key findings

# Key Findings

- Overall users found the flow to be simple & straightforward, but with some unclear and confusing steps.
- **Intro page:** Users are confused about the info on the *Opt out process* and the rules about *New Evidence*.
- **Opt Out page:** All participants are confused about this page. In order to continue the flow, they want to know the implications, the benefits (of new process), and what claim(s) they are actually opting out from.
- **Add Notes page:** Users think this page is for uploading new evidence. When they see link: *What if I have new evidence*, they still expect to upload new evidence here. Confused about the purpose of this page.
- **Same Office page:** Participants are confused about this page. Users want the contextual info to be available upfront. Reading the info, users think their choice will not matter. (“VA will do what they want”).
- **Informal Conference page:** Users think they are scheduling the conference here. They assume they will receive a call the next couple of days with a time for the conference. Users want to choose day(s) of week, a range of dates, an option to contact both representative and themselves, and an option to add an alternate phone number.

# Additional findings

- **Review application:** Users want a Print or Save button. Some users expected to see their name and a receipt or appeals number on top of the *Review* page.
- **Submit page:** users like that they can track the status. Users want a Print or Save button. User suggestion: "Please allow at least ... days before checking the Claim status." A few users would like an email in addition to a phone number.
- Users are very positive to be able to complete the HLR process 100% online.
- All users want to avoid calling VA. Users expect 45-60 minutes initial wait time to get through, and then several hours on the phone. They want alternatives to a phone call (email, chat).

Detailed findings and quotes

# Finding 1

**Intro page:** users like the *time commitment* info and the *Finish later* option. Users are confused about the *Opt out process* and the rules about *New Evidence*. Users are not sure what the benefits and implications of opting out are, and the difference between old and new appeals process. Users are confused about the *New Evidence* rules. They think new evidence could be relevant in a HLR process. Users want clarification.

*“When you come here, [it states] you have to opt out of the old appeals process, and that’s not clear. I may have multiple appeals happening at the same time...for example, I have [several appeals]...so telling me I am withdrawing from those appeals is not the right thing to say.”*

[Home](#) » [VA decision review and appeals](#) » [Request a Higher-Level Review](#)

## Request a Higher-Level Review

Equal to VA Form 20-0996 (Higher-Level Review).

**Note:** Since you're signed in to your account, we can prefill part of your application based on your account details. You can also save your form in progress and come back later to finish filling it out.

After you click the button to start the Higher-Level Review application, you'll need to opt out (withdraw) from the old appeals process. This switch triggers us to formally withdraw your claim or appeal from the old appeal system and process it under the new system. Once you opt in to the new appeals process, the decision is permanent and you can't return to the old appeals process.

[Start the Higher-Level Review application »](#)

### Follow the steps below to request a Higher-Level Review.

#### 1 Prepare

To fill out this application, you'll need your:

- Primary address (or forwarding address if you'll be moving soon)
- List of issues you disagree with and the VA decision date for each
- Representative's contact information (optional)

When you request a Higher-Level Review, you won't be able to submit new evidence. If you have new evidence to submit, you'll need to select another review option.

[Learn more about review options](#)

#### What if I need help with my application?

If you need help requesting a Higher-Level Review, you can contact a VA regional office and ask to speak to a counselor. To find the nearest regional office, please call 800-827-1000 or [visit our facility locator tool](#).

An accredited representative, like a Veterans Service Officer (VSO) can help you request a decision review.

[Get help requesting a decision review](#)

# Finding 2

**Opt Out page:** All participants are confused about this page. In order to continue the flow, they want to know the implications, the benefits (of the new appeals process), and what claim(s) they are actually opting out from. Users find the language on this page intimidating and scary in its definite / permanent tone. Users want to skip or stop the flow here.

*“What would be the benefit of opting out of the old system? That would be my question.”*

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## Request a Higher-Level Review

Equal to VA Form 20-0996 (Higher-Level Review).

### Opt out of the old appeals system

To request a Higher-Level Review, you'll need to opt out (withdraw) from the old appeals process. This switch triggers us to formally withdraw your claim or appeal from the old appeal system and process it under the new system. Once you opt in to the new appeals process, the decision is permanent and you can't return to the old appeals process.



**I choose to opt out of the old appeals process (\*Required)**

I'm removing my claim and any related hearing requests from the old appeals process, and I'm requesting these be reviewed under the new appeals review process.

I understand that this decision is permanent and I can't return to the old appeals process.

« Back

Continue »

[Learn more about the review options](#)

# Finding 3

**Add Notes page:** Users think this page is for uploading new evidence. Even when they see the link “*What if i have new evidence*” they expect to see an upload link for new evidence or documents. They are very confused about what info to enter here, and what the purpose of this page is. Users think 400 characters is not enough. (Is this page a legal requirement?).

“There shouldn't be a character limit. Also there should be an option to upload documentation.....being able to upload supporting docs, letter, etc.”

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## Request a Higher-Level Review

Form 20-0996

2 of 4 Contested issues

### Tinnitus

Please add anything you want the reviewer to consider when going over your request. For example, why do you think the decision should be changed, or was there an error in the prior decision? (400 characters maximum)

What if I have new and relevant evidence? ▾

# Finding 4

**Same Office page:** Participants are confused about these options, and what they are actually choosing on this page. When they click on “No” and read the contextual info, they think their choice will not matter. (“VA will just do what they want”). Users want this info to be available upfront. They question the purpose of this page. (Is this page a legal requirement?).

*“If you're asking me a question about what I want to do and then telling me that you're not gonna do it then I don't know why you'd be asking me in the first place.”*

The image displays two screenshots of the VA 'Request a Higher-Level Review' form, specifically the 'Contested issues' step (2 of 4). The top screenshot shows the 'Yes' option selected, with a red box highlighting the question and the 'Yes' button. A callout box to the right states 'Yes is preselected'. The bottom screenshot shows the 'No' option selected, with a red box highlighting the question, the 'No' button, and a detailed informational section titled 'We will try to fulfill your request'. A callout box to the right states 'No is selected'.

**Top Screenshot (Yes selected):**

- Header: VA | U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
- Navigation: Search, Contact Us, Hector
- Sub-navigation: VA Benefits and Health Care, About VA, Find a VA Location
- Breadcrumbs: Home > VA decision review and appeals > Request a Higher-Level Review
- Title: Request a Higher-Level Review
- Form ID: Form 20-0996
- Progress: 2 of 4 Contested issues
- Question: Would you like the same office that issued your prior decisions to conduct the review?
- Options: ☒ Yes, ☐ No
- Buttons: < Back, Continue >
- Link: Finish this application later.
- Callout: Yes is preselected

**Bottom Screenshot (No selected):**

- Header: VA | U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
- Navigation: Search, Contact Us, Hector
- Sub-navigation: VA Benefits and Health Care, About VA, Find a VA Location
- Breadcrumbs: Home > VA decision review and appeals > Request a Higher-Level Review
- Title: Request a Higher-Level Review
- Form ID: Form 20-0996
- Progress: 2 of 4 Contested issues
- Question: Would you like the same office that issued your prior decisions to conduct the review?
- Options: ☐ Yes, ☒ No
- Informational Section: **We will try to fulfill your request**  
Some issues can only be at the office that issued your prior decision. And some decisions are only processed at one VA office or facility.  
If we cannot fulfill your request, we will notify you at the time the Higher-level Review decision is made.
- Buttons: < Back, Continue >
- Link: Finish this application later.
- Callout: No is selected




# Finding 5

**Informal conference page:** Users think they are scheduling the actual conference here. Copy is not clear enough. They assume that they will get a call in the next couple of days with a time for the conference. Users find it unacceptable to wait 3 months for a phone call every day at certain times. They want to choose day(s) of the week, and a range of dates. They want an option to contact both representative and themselves, and an option to add an alternate phone number.

*“Oh my gosh I just read it and you're right! I thought it was for the conference itself and we would have it in that time block.”*

VA

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My VA

My Health

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## Request a Higher-Level Review

Form 20-0996

3 of 4

Request an informal conference

You or your accredited representative (claims agent, attorney, or Veterans Service Organization) may request an informal conference with the reviewer assigned to your Higher-Level Review request.

If you request an informal conference, the reviewer will call you or your representative. During this call you or your representative will have the chance to discuss why you think the decision should be changed and identify factual errors.

You can request only one informal conference for each Higher-Level Review request.

Would you like to request an informal conference? **(\*Required)**

☐ No, I do not want an informal conference

☒ Yes, call me

☐ Yes, call my representative

We will contact you directly to schedule an informal conference with the higher-level reviewer assigned to complete the review of your issue.


Please choose up to two time periods you're available for a phone call where we can schedule a time for your informal conference.

☐ 8:00 a.m. - 10:00 a.m. ET

☐ 10:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. ET

☒ 12:30 p.m. - 2:00 p.m. ET

☐ 2:00 p.m. - 4:30 p.m. ET

 We'll make two attempts to contact you

A senior reviewer will try to call you by phone two times. If no one answers, they'll leave a voice mail. If the senior reviewer is unable to leave a message or get in touch with you after two attempts, they'll proceed with their review and issue a decision.

# Finding 6

**Review application:** Users find this page to be clear and straightforward. The collapsed boxes makes sense for the users. Several users want a Print or Save button on this page. Some users expected to see their name as well as a receipt or appeals number on the top of the *Review* page.

*“I think it's interesting that NOW we have a privacy notice...I'd like to see a receipt button. So far I've not seen a print button.”*

VA

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Home

VA decision review and appeals

Request a Higher-Level Review

## Request a Higher-Level Review

Form 20-0996

4 of 4 Review application

Veteran details

Contact information

Edit

Phone number(401) 226-1234

Email addressallesandra.baker@gmail.com

CountryUSA

Street address123 Charlesgate Rd

CityProvidence

StateRhode Island

Postal code02903

Contested issues

Contested issues

Tinnitus

Edit

Ringling in the ears. More intense in right ear.

Current rating: 10%

Please add anything you want the reviewer to consider when going over your request. For example, why do you think

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Nullam pellentesque leo eu

# Finding 7

**Submit page:** Users find this page to be clear and straightforward. Users like that they can track the status. User suggestion: *"Please allow at least ... days before checking the Claim status."*

A few users would like to have an option to have an email confirmation sent to them.

*"I know y'all love mail, but they need to have an option to go paperless. Would be great to just have something sent to my email."*

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## Request a Higher-Level Review

Form 20-0996

### Your request has been submitted

We'll mail you a letter confirming your request within **5 business days**.

We may contact you for more information or documents.

*Please print this page for your records.*

#### Higher-Level Review (Form 20-0996)

for ALESSANDRA BAKER

#### Date submitted

November 7, 2019

### After your request a decision review

When your review is complete, VA will mail you a decision packet that includes details about the decision on your case. [Learn more about what happens after you request a review](#)

### What should I do while I wait?

You don't need to do anything unless VA sends you a letter asking for more information. If VA schedules any exams for you, be sure not to miss them.

If you requested a decision review and haven't heard back from VA yet, please don't request another review. Call VA at [800-827-1000](#).

[Track the status of your claim or appeal](#)

# Finding 8

All users want to avoid calling VA. Users expect 45-60 minutes initial wait time to get through, and then several hours on the phone. They want alternatives to a phone call (email, chat).

Users are very positive to the possibility of doing the HLR process 100% online.

*“You ever try to call VA or CHAMPVA? You are on the phone for HOURS. We don't have time for that. I'd rather spend the time driving downtown and talk to someone and get it done.”*

# Recommendations

# Recommendations

- **Intro page:** Increase visibility of, and add info about *New Evidence* and *Opt out process*. Move info about *New Evidence* up to the first paragraph. Add info box or F.A.Q. (e.g. Why should I opt out? What are the implications?) for the *Opt out process* and the rules for *New Evidence* in the HLR process.
- **Opt out page.** Move to the *Contested issues page* to provide contextual info. (This idea came from Riley Orr). Users need to know what specific claim they opt out from. (Or at the very least add info: Opt out is for the issues / claims that you will choose when going through this flow).
- **Add notes page.** Users are confused about the purpose of this page, when they understand (with our guidance) that it's not for new evidence. Consider removing from flow (Legal requirement?). If this step is needed copy needs to be reworked for clarity.
- **Same office page:** Remove preselection and move contextual info to the top of page. Users since are confused about the purpose of this step. Consider removing from the flow (Legal requirement?). If this step is needed, copy needs to be reworked for clarity.

# Recommendations (continued)

- **Informal Conference page:** clarify through copy and potentially new design elements that this step is only to schedule a call to book a conference. Add an option to contact both a representative and themselves. Allow users to add an alternate phone number. Remove "Senior Reviewer" in contextual info box.
- **Contact info page:** When user edit *Contact Info*, allow them do auto update on all VA systems, at least their Profile Page.
- **Contested Issues:** "Don't see issue" link: remove "Pension".
- **Review application page** and **Submit application page:** add button for print and save. Consider sending a confirmation email for the Submit page.
  - Consider adding "Allow (number of...) days before checking claim status".

Specific design  
recommendations  
(still in progress during Sprint 14)



# Design Recommendation 1

**Intro page:** Consider adding an info box about the *Opt out process*, or adding a F.A.Q. section (why should I do this, what are the benefits, what are the implications, what the difference between new and old appeals process? etc.)

Increase visibility by moving info about *New Evidence* up to the first paragraph (with the link “*Learn more about review options*”).

Consider if more info about this rule is needed on this page.

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## Request a Higher-Level Review

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After you click the button to start the Higher-Level Review application, you'll need to opt out (withdraw) from the old appeals process. This switch triggers us to formally withdraw your claim or appeal from the old appeal system and process it under the new system. Once you opt in to the new appeals process, the decision is permanent and you can't return to the old appeals process.

[Start the Higher-Level Review application »](#)

### Follow the steps below to request a Higher-Level Review.

#### 1 Prepare

To fill out this application, you'll need your:

- Primary address (or forwarding address if you'll be moving soon)
- List of issues you disagree with and the VA decision date for each
- Representative's contact information (optional)

When you request a Higher-Level Review, you won't be able to submit new evidence. If you have new evidence to submit, you'll need to select another review option.

[Learn more about review options](#)

#### What if I need help with my application?

If you need help requesting a Higher-Level Review, you can contact a VA regional office and ask to speak to a counselor. To find the nearest regional office, please call 800-827-1000 or [visit our facility locator tool](#).

An accredited representative, like a Veterans Service Officer (VSO) can help you request a decision review.

[Get help requesting a decision review](#)

# Design Recommendation 2

**Opt out page:** (idea and design by Riley Orr).  
Move the *Opt Out page* to the *Contested Issue page* to make it contextual. Allow user to know what claim/issue specifically this opt out action is for.

Consider reworking copy to make language less “scary” and “intimidating” (phrases used by users).

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## Request a Higher-Level Review

Form 20-0996

2 of 4 Contested issues

### Opt out of the old appeals system

To request a Higher-Level Review, you'll need to opt out (withdraw) from the old appeals process for legacy issues that match your selected contested issues. This switch triggers us to formally withdraw your claim or appeal from the old appeal system and process it under the new system. Once you opt in to the new appeals process, the decision is permanent and you can't return to the old appeals process.

Select a legacy issue that matches your selected contested issue.

You are only able to opt out of legacy issues that match a contested issue.

☒ **Tinnitus**

Ringing in the ears. More intense in right ear.

Disposition: Remanded

☐ **Headaches**

Acute chronic head pain.

Disposition: Denied

Don't see the issue you're looking for? ▾

☐ **I choose to opt out of the old appeals process** (\*Required)

I'm removing my claim and any related hearing requests from the old appeals process, and I'm requesting these be reviewed under the new appeals review process.

I understand that this decision is permanent and I can't return to the old appeals process.

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Continue »

# Design Recommendation 3

**Add Notes page:** Remove this page from the flow. Users find it confusing and don't know what to use it for.

If the page is a legal requirement, rework the copy to clarify that this page is not for adding documents or new evidence. Provide info or examples of what kind of info is relevant on this page.

Consider increasing the 400 character limit.

The screenshot shows the VA website's 'Request a Higher-Level Review' page. The header includes the VA logo, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs name, and navigation links for Search, Contact Us, and Hector. Below the header, there are links for VA Benefits and Health Care, About VA, and Find a VA Location. The main content area shows the breadcrumb trail: Home > VA decision review and appeals > Request a Higher-Level Review. The title 'Request a Higher-Level Review' is prominently displayed, followed by the form number 'Form 20-0996'. A progress bar indicates the current step is '2 of 4 Contested issues'. The specific issue being reviewed is 'Tinnitus'. A red box highlights a text input area with the instruction: 'Please add anything you want the reviewer to consider when going over your request. For example, why do you think the decision should be changed, or was there an error in the prior decision? (400 characters maximum)'. Below the input area is a dropdown menu labeled 'What if I have new and relevant evidence?'.

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Home > VA decision review and appeals > Request a Higher-Level Review

## Request a Higher-Level Review

Form 20-0996

2 of 4 Contested issues

### Tinnitus

Please add anything you want the reviewer to consider when going over your request. For example, why do you think the decision should be changed, or was there an error in the prior decision? (400 characters maximum)

What if I have new and relevant evidence? ▾

# Design Recommendation 4

**Same Office page:** Remove page from the flow. Users find it confusing and question its purpose.

If page is a legal requirement, remove preselection and move contextual info to the top of the page. Rework the copy in the contextual info box for more clarity.

The image displays two versions of the VA 'Request a Higher-Level Review' form (Form 20-0996) side-by-side, illustrating a design recommendation. Both versions feature a dark blue header with the VA logo, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, and navigation links (Search, Contact Us, Hector). The main title is 'Request a Higher-Level Review'.

**Top Screenshot (Current State):** The form is at step 2 of 4, 'Contested issues'. The question is 'Would you like the same office that issued your prior decisions to conduct the review?'. The 'Yes' radio button is preselected. A red box highlights the question and the 'Yes' option. To the right, a text box states 'Yes is preselected'.

**Bottom Screenshot (Recommended State):** The form is at step 2 of 4, 'Contested issues'. The question is 'Would you like the same office that issued your prior decisions to conduct the review?'. The 'No' radio button is selected. A red box highlights the question and the 'No' option. To the right, a text box states 'No is selected'. Below the question, a new section titled 'We will try to fulfill your request' is added, containing explanatory text: 'Some issues can only be at the office that issued your prior decision. And some decisions are only processed at one VA office or facility. If we cannot fulfill your request, we will notify you at the time the Higher-level Review decision is made.'

# Design Recommendation 5

**Informal Conference page:** Rework copy to clarify that this step is only to schedule a call to book a conference.

Add clear steps to this process: 1. Choose who we should call to schedule a time for the conference. 2. Choose time(s) you are available for a call to schedule the conference. 3. Wait for a call from VA within the next 125 days in the time periods you chose, where you will schedule a time for the conference. 4. Have the informal conference.

Add an option to contact both a representative and themselves. Allow users to add an alternate phone number. Remove "Senior Reviewer" in contextual info box.

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## Request a Higher-Level Review

Form 20-0996

### 3 of 4 Request an informal conference

You or your accredited representative (claims agent, attorney, or Veterans Service Organization) may request an informal conference with the reviewer assigned to your Higher-Level Review request.

If you request an informal conference, the reviewer will call you or your representative. During this call you or your representative will have the chance to discuss why you think the decision should be changed and identify factual errors.

#### 1 Choose who we should call to schedule a time for your informal conference

Would you like to request an informal conference? (\*Required)

- ☐ No, I do not want an informal conference
- ☒ Yes, call me
- ☐ Yes, call my representative

We will contact you directly to schedule an informal conference with the higher-level reviewer assigned to complete the review of your issue.

#### 2 Choose up to two times when you are available for a call to schedule a time for your informal conference

- ☐ 8:00 a.m. - 10:00 a.m. ET
- ☐ 10:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. ET
- ☒ 12:30 p.m. - 2:00 p.m. ET
- ☐ 2:00 p.m. - 4:30 p.m. ET

##### 4 We'll make two attempts to contact you

A senior reviewer will try to call you by phone two times. If no one answers, they'll leave a voice mail. If the senior reviewer is unable to leave a message or get in touch with you after two attempts, they'll proceed with their review and issue a decision.

#### 3 Expect a call from VA within the next 125 days, in the time frame(s) you chose, were you will schedule a time for your informal conference.

#### 4 Have the informal conference.

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[Finish this application later.](#)

Next steps

# Next steps

- **Design recommendations:** Kevin and Christian will continue to work on the practical design recommendations in Sprint 14.
- **Design implementations:** Kevin will implement the design recommendations in Sprint 14.
- **AMO input:** Gather the questions from the HLR readout, present to Lauren S. in AMO. Ask for her input.
- **HLR readout:** share with Riley, Shawna,

# Appendix