

VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

Board Appeals (Notice of Disagreement) usability test.

March 26 - April 2, 2021

Background

The online form for Board Appeals (also called Notice of Disagreement) is a new, veteran-facing online product that needs to be tested for usability issues and pain points with veterans.

Research Goals

- What usability issues and pain points exist in the Board Appeals prototype?
- Are there any confusion with regards to language and terms used in the form?
- Can users go through the form with ease and no blockers?
- Do participants feel they have all the information they need to complete the form?

Methodology

Method

We conducted a remote, moderated, task-oriented usability study, using Zoom

- Participants logged into Zoom with their computer, shared their screen, and opened up the prototype (Invision) for us to observe their interactions.
- The participants were given tasks to perform within the prototype.

The structure of the study:

- 5 minutes for introduction and warm-up questions.
- Approximately 35 minutes with usability tasks and questions
- 5 min for exit questions and wrap-up

The participants in this study consisted of 7 veterans:

- 6 male and 1 female
- 4 was between 55 and 64 years of age, 1 was above 75, 1 was between 35 and 44, (1 - unknown age).
- Mix of education level

Findings

Findings Summary

1. **Several** participants **have submitted a board appeal** before. Their experiences varied from *pretty easy* to a *very frustrating experience that took several years*.
2. **Overall** participants find the **online form for Board Appeals easy to navigate**. The *Veteran details-*, *Additional evidence-*, and *Review your request* pages are intuitive/self-explanatory.
3. **Participants are confused by the Opt-in information** on the *Board Appeals Info* page and on the *Issues Eligible for Review* page.
4. A few participants would **like to be asked why they are appealing** a claim decision.
5. Participants are **appalled by the processing time** for the *Board Appeals*.
6. Some **key elements are not discoverable** enough. A few participants needed prompting to locate the drop-down links (e.g. *Why aren't all my issues listed here?*).
7. Participants would be **confused and worried if they did only see some of their issues listed** on the *Issues Eligible for Review* page. They would add their issues not shown, to make sure they were all in the system.
8. **Inconsistent copy about the board review options** between the *Board Appeals Info* page and the *Board Review Options* page.
9. Participants would like to **upload several/all documents simultaneously**.
10. Several participants **want to be able to print** (and save) **the entire form** when it is filled out.

Details of Findings 1, 2

1. Several participants **have submitted a board appeal** before. Their experience varied from *pretty easy* (with a VSO) to *a very frustrating experience that took several years*.

“I have no issues with the law judge, but they don’t do it in a timely fashion, having it there since 2014 then sending it back, it is just sitting on the desk, or sitting in a cabinet until they get to it”.

2. Overall participants find the Board Appeals **online form easy to navigate**. The *Veteran details -*, *Additional evidence -*, and the *Review your request* pages seemed self-explanatory for the participants.

- a. A few participants were not sure if they would have their representative’s email at hand, or would prefer not to leave the form to locate that email.
- b. Two participants suggested providing a definition for *VA-accredited attorney or agent*.

Details of Findings 3

3. Participants are confused by the *Opt-in* information on the *Board Appeals Info* page and on the *Issues Eligible for Review* page.

- a. Participants think the following information is lacking:
 - i. what is the difference between the old and the new review process?

“I think maybe it should be something that says that the VA has changed their review process. I think there is a lack of transparency here”.

- ii. why should they choose the new review process?
 - iii. what are the actual consequences of their choice?

Can I request a Board Appeal?

You can request a Board Appeal after an initial claim, Supplemental Claim, or Higher-Level Review decision. You can't request 2 Board Appeals in a row for the same claim.

You have one year from the date on your decision letter to request a Board Appeal, unless you have a [contested claim](#).

A note about opting in to the new process: If you received a VA decision before February 19, 2019, and you want to appeal your decision under the new decision review process, you'll need to opt in. When you fill out the request form, you'll need to check an opt-in box. This withdraws your claim from the legacy appeals process (the process for decisions received before February 19, 2019). Your claim will move forward under the new process.

☐ Headaches

Acute chronic head pain.

Current rating: **N/A**

Decision date: Jan. 15, 2020

Add issue

☐ **I understand that if any issues I've selected are from the legacy appeals process, I'm opting them into the new decision review process. (*Required)**

By checking this box, you're withdrawing any issues you've selected from the legacy appeals process (this is the process for decisions received before February 19, 2019). Instead, the Board will consider your claim for this condition under the new process.

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Details of Findings 3

- a. Participants are confused about the term *legacy appeals process*.

"I think I would need to read it 10 times to understand it".

- b. Participants are uncomfortable with copy: *...you are withdrawing any issues you've selected...* They are not sure about the consequence of this choice.

"I am not withdrawing any issues, even though it says it will be under the new process. I don't get a warm and fuzzy feeling here, it makes me feel like I am terminating my rights even though when you read further on it will be under the new process".

☐ **I understand that if any issues I've selected are from the legacy appeals process, I'm opting them into the new decision review process. (*Required)**

By checking this box, you're withdrawing any issues you've selected from the legacy appeals process (this is the process for decisions received before February 19, 2019). Instead, the Board will consider your claim for this condition under the new process.

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Details of Findings 4, 5, 6

4. A few participants **would like to be asked why they are appealing**. They would like to add information about what part of an appeal they are appealing, and why.

I need to say something like: "I disagree with the rating. Here's why I disagree and here's whatever information I want to present to justify my disagreement".

5. **Participants are appalled by the processing time** for the *Board Appeals*. They think that *one year and more than one year* is too long, and would also like more granularity in these time estimates.

One year to complete, wow! I think that is disgusting, I could be dead in a year.

6. Some **key elements are not discoverable** enough. A few participants needed prompting to locate drop-down links (e.g. *Why aren't all my issues listed here?*)

"It was not clear that it was a link, with the arrow and everything. I looked for the blue color. I also have one eye that doesn't work".

2 of 7 participants (Vietnam-era veterans) needed prompting to locate the *Request a Board Appeal* button.

2 of 4 **Issues eligible for review**

These issues are in your VA record. If an issue is missing from this list, you can add it now by clicking the **Add issue** button.

Why aren't all my issues listed here? ▾

Please select the issue(s) you'd like us to review: (*Required)

How do I request a Board Appeal?

You can request a Board Appeal online right now.

 [Request a Board Appeal](#)

Other ways to request a Board Appeal

By mail

Fill out the [Decision Review Request: Board Appeal \(VA Form 10182\)](#).

[Download VA Form 10182 \(PDF\)](#).

You can send the completed form to the Board at the address below. You can also via fax to 844-678-8979.

Board of Veterans' Appeals
P.O. Box 27063
Washington, DC 20038

Details of Findings 6

- a. The explanation under the link: *Why aren't all my issues listed here?* is not adequate for some participants.

"...it's kind of a lame excuse! It sounds like the VA doesn't have its act together".

- i. A few participants worried that not everyone would notice the drop-down link.
 - 1. One participant thought there should be a possibility to take action here about this issue (e.g. contact info).

"This text is informative, but doesn't give me an action. What should I do if I don't see my issue? Maybe there should be a status report or a link to where you can go to see if it is being processed".

Details of Findings 7

7. Participants would be **confused and worried if they did only see some of their issues listed** on the *Issues Eligible for Review* page.

Multiple participants said that they would add all their issues that were not shown, to make sure that all their issues were registered in the system.

“I don’t like it. They should list all issues, even if one is pending. If I submitting it electronically they must have received it. I feel like I needed to add all the issues again since they have not been registered.”

- a. One participant worries that if veterans can add any issue, they will potentially list any issue they can think of, and overwhelm the system.

“If the guys can add any issues that are bothering them, they will gum up the system. There needs to be a system of checks and balances”.

2 of 4 Issues eligible for review

These issues are in your VA record. If an issue is missing from this list, you can add it now by clicking the **Add issue** button.

[Why aren't all my issues listed here? ▾](#)

Please select the issue(s) you'd like us to review: (*Required)

☐

Tinnitus

Ring in the ears. More intense in right ear.

Current rating: **10%**

Decision date: Jan. 10, 2020

☐

Headaches

Acute chronic head pain.

Current rating: **N/A**

Decision date: Jan. 15, 2020

Add issue

Details of Findings 7, 8

- a. Participants expect all their issues (eligible for an appeal) to be listed.

“If you can list 2 issues, then you can list all of them. I would need to click add issues and add them all in. It seems odd that I need to tell VA the issues on a VA website, you would assume they have all of the information”.

8. Inconsistent copy about the board review options between the *Board Appeals Info* page and the *Board Review Options* page.

- a. A few participants were confused by the 3 options. Two participants seemed to interpret these as steps in the process, and not options.
- b. A couple of users wanted to see the time estimates also on the *Board Review Options* page, preferably with more granular time estimates.

“Direct review is the fastest, but the prior pages said each take over a year so that doesn’t make any sense. Option B says it takes longer, but I was told earlier that everything takes over a year. You tell me direct review is the quickest and B and C take longer. Before I was told everything takes over a year, I am lost here”.

Details of Findings 9, 10

9. Participants **would like to upload several / all documents in one go**. They assumed that the 25 MB limit for uploading additional evidence is per document. A few participants are worried that they can reach this limit.

Additional evidence page one: “I would highlight the “90 days” and put it in bold print to make sure Veterans understand that. If you don’t get it done in 90 days, then you’ve already lost the battle.”

10. Several participants **want to be able to print** (and save) **the entire form** (filled out), not only the *Submitted* page. Being able to **check the status of the appeal seems very important** for the participants.

“After I close my browser, how can I check the status of my appeal at another time? Information about that would be helpful.”

“Checking the status of the appeal is the absolute most important to us.”

Recommendations

Recommendations

- Change the copy about ...*opting into the new process* on the *Board Appeals Info* page: use plain language, simplify language, consider not using *legacy appeals process*, but instead *old* and *new appeals process*.
 - Consider if the *Request a Board Appeal* button is noticeable enough.
 - Change copy on button *Track the status of your claim* to ...*appeals*.
- Add a definition (or infobox) for *VA-accredited attorney or agent on the Veteran details* page.
- Make the representative's email address optional or remove the question.

Recommendations (continued)

- Considerations for the *Issues eligible for review* page:
 - Consider making the drop-down link *Why aren't all my issues listed here* more noticeable.
 - Change the copy of the Opt-in note from *Legacy Appeals Process* to plain language (e.g. *new and old appeal process*). Simplify and clarify the copy about the opt-in process, and make it consistent with the copy about the opt-in process on the *Board Appeals Info* page.
 - Due to the incomplete list of issues eligible for Board Appeal, allow veterans to instead manually add the issues they want to appeal to the board. Caveat: if the list of issues in fact shows most of their issues, keeping the list makes sense (we are waiting for more data on this.)
 - Tech discovery - can additional data be pulled from VBS, to provide a *complete* list with all the veteran's issues, whether *registered* or just *pending*?
- Make the copy on the *Board review option* page consistent with the *Board Appeals Info* page. Simplify language if possible. Add the time estimates to both pages.
 - Business process discovery: can the time estimates be more granular?
- Consider allowing veterans to print (and save) the whole completed form.

Next steps

Next Steps

- *Tech discovery*: can additional data be pulled from VBS, to provide a complete list with all the veteran's issues, whether registered or just pending?
- *Business process discovery*: can a more granular time estimate for the different board appeal options be presented?

Questions?

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