**Conversation Guide: Veterans' Experiences at VA Benefit Offices**

Start recording.

* **I have started recording.** I'd like to confirm: Are you comfortable if I record my screen and audio as we talk today?" Yes, I am.

## **Warm-up Questions - 2 min**

* Can you tell me a little about yourself and your relationship to the VA? I am a 30year Veteran.

## **Baseline Questions - 3 min**

* In the pre-interview survey, you indicated that you had visited a VA Benefits Office in the last 6 months. Specifically, you visited a **[Answer to Screener Question #1 - type of facility]**, is that correct? Yes.
* In your own words, could you briefly describe the reason for your visit to that office? I went there for job placement and signing up for educational benefits for my son.
* [Confirm benefit-related service(s)] Okay, so just to confirm, it sounds like this visit was related to [benefit type], correct?
  + This should line up with answer to screener question #2. If not, ask to follow up.
  + On the survey, you also listed **[answer to screener question #2 - benefit type]**, could you tell me about that?
* Before visiting the office, did you try to complete this task via another method (phone, online, etc.)? I looked around at other VA sites, but it seems better for me to do it in person. For my son it was turning in different paperwork.
  + Follow up to understand how they came to decide that visiting the office was the best way to complete the task

## **Preparing for the Visit Questions - 8 min**

My first set of questions is about the steps you took to prepare yourself for visiting the office.

* How did you first learn about this office? It is the same one I went to for my initial VA claim when I go out of the military.
  + Skip or rephrase based on answers baseline questions
* When you were preparing, did you research any other benefit office locations?
  + There is one that is closer to my house, but I prefer to go to the one I went to initially because I have always had success there.
* What sources did you consult to get ready for your visit?
  + I just make sure I have all the paperwork, that it is filled out correctly, and that I have all my stuff. I research it online. I fill them out online and print them off at home.
* What information did you gather from these sources?
  + I would say the first time I did, but otherwise I knew what time and dates they were open. If I forget I will look it up online. When I went there, I asked them about the educational benefits, and they told me they only had that person there certain days of the week.
  + Directions? Hours?
  + Details about benefit services/tasks?
* What tasks did you complete before your appointment? I just showed up early.
  + Making an appointment?
  + Any paperwork forms? I just showed up and met with someone and they looked up the resume building and job fairs for me.
* Did you feel prepared for your visit? Overall, I would say I was. I will still take a pen and paper with me in case I need to write something out.
  + Were you actually prepared, or was there a surprise when you got to the office?
* Is there anything else you wish you had known before your visit? I would probably say it would nice to know that you needed a second form of identity or have them inputted in the system as my dependent. Otherwise, it wasn’t too bad.

## **Visiting Questions - 8 min**

Okay, now we're going to talk specifically about the day you visited the benefit office.

* Where is this office located?
  + How far away is that from where you live? It is about 25 miles.
* How did you travel to the office? I drove.
  + Method of transportation (car/bus, etc.)?
  + Wayfinding/directions (landmarks, GPS, printed)?
* Did anyone accompany you on the visit? I went by myself.
* Did you have any issues getting to the building (directions, parking, etc.)? Nope, even when I first visited it was easy to find. There are other county buildings in the area, but there is special parking for Veterans, and it was clearly marked. The parking lot for easy to find because it is basically in front of the building.
  + Was the address and hours accurately represented?
* Once you were inside the building, how did you find your way to the floor/room you needed? Yes.
  + Was there any signage that guided you?
  + Did you speak with any employees? (e.g., receptionist) There was a sign right in the front of the building, an entrance door and they greeted me, I tell them why I am there, and if there are other people you just stand in line. I had one meeting with one person.
  + Was there a waiting area of any kind?
  + How did you know when you were at the right place?
* Did you have a pre-scheduled appointment, or did you just walk-in? Yes, walked up.
* Was there anything you wish you had on that day that would have made your visit easier? I think I felt pretty prepared.
* How did you figure out this is where you wanted to get signed up for benefits in 2016? Someone I know had previously went there when he retired. It was kind of like follow the leader.

## **Benefit Task Questions - 8 min**

For this next part, we're going to talk about the **[benefit-related task]** you wanted to complete at the office.

* Were you able to complete the task during the visit? I went there with a copy of my resumes, they gave me pointers on what I should be changing, they had a list of job fairs in the area, they showed me county job listings, and once I did that I marked up on my resume. I took my resume to the job fair and went from there. I got what I needed from that visit.

I went online, filled out the information for my son’s school, printed out the paperwork, and took it in. They made sure it was California school, not private, and then they ensured he was my dependent. When I first retired, he was not enrolled into the VA system that he was dependent so I had to bring in his birth certificate to show them and get him enrolled.

* + Did you visit multiple offices?
  + Did you have to visit the same office multiple times?
* Was there another way you could have completed the task?
* If you had the option of completing this task online / by phone / or in-person, what would your preferences be? 1st in person, over the phone is not bad as long as I built that relationship in person first. I am more pleased with that type of situation rather than just talking to someone I don’t know.
  + Rank 1st, 2nd, 3rd
  + I would still prefer to be in person.
* Is there any information specific to this task/benefit that you wish you had before your visit? Not really because I had a copy of my resume, and my interests are basically on your resume. I knew that and that felt good.
* Did you know you had to do that, or did you just do it because you felt you needed to do it? I felt like I needed nothing they told me I needed.

It doesn’t hurt to have a copy of the birth certificate to prove that they are your dependent. Just have the paperwork as a backup. Here is all my stuff and I may need.

* [Repeat questions if there are multiple tasks or benefits]

## **General Benefit Office Questions - 5 min**

For this last section, I'm going to ask you some general questions about VA benefit offices. There are no right or wrong answers, I'm just interested in your perspective.

* In addition to the [benefit task] that brought you to this office, can you think of other reasons you or another Veteran might visit this location in the future? I think that is it. I did my initial VA claim, job placement, and my son’s education. I have recommended my other friends getting
  + What other tasks might be completed here? I know they do housing assistance for homeless people; I am not in that situation, but I know others can use that. Mental counseling, addiction counseling, and other counseling they may need. I have recommended others there and they have been able to get help.
* I'm going to share my screen and show you a list of benefit offices. [Share screen] **Can you see my screen?**
* As we go through this list, for each office type I'd like you to tell me if you've heard of it before.
  + Regional Benefit Office: I think what gives them a 5-star rating is that they are a one stop shop. They can help you with everything that you may need assistance with.
  + Satellite Benefit Office: I would probably say the smaller one in my area is a Satellite office, but they do not have someone there everyday for specific things and you have to set up an appointment. I think that is what the smaller was.
  + Integrated Disability Evaluation System Site: Nope.
  + Pre-Discharge Site: I would probably have not heard of that, but for me I went to the regional office prior to my discharge and that is how I did all my paperwork. I did all my medical record scrub a year before my retirement. There was someone on post that would help with your retirement paperwork, but I choose to go to the Reginal office.
  + Veteran Readiness and Employment Office: I haven’t heard of one that does just Veteran Readiness and Employment. I know the regional office did have all that and the Satellite had pamphlets there.
  + VetSuccess On Campus: I have heard of it, but I do not remember where I say it. When I went to the VA, I know there is an office and a man that hands out information on different programs, but I am not sure if that is what it is.
* Follow up for each office type they know in your words, what can Veterans do at this type of office?
* If they indicate having heard of at least two types:
  + Based on your understanding of these different office types, are there any important connections between them? I would think that the information is pushed from Regional to Satellite and that they would recommend other offices if they thought it would benefit you more. They would call offices for you to see if they can get you hooked up with the other office.
    - For example, have you ever been referred from one office to another? Yeah, they did refer me to the regional office.
* Are you involved in any Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs)? So I go to the VA, I am a funny person, so I don’t really get involved in organizations. I am not a big drinker, and I don’t want to make a commitment to an organization, but I would love to help with volunteer. I would go to the website to get information on what they may be doing to help the community. I will help, but I do not want to be in the organization.
  + If you wanted to learn more about VSOs in your area, where would you look?
  + What kind of advice would you do? This is something I have been exposed to, take a booklet with you, and be prepared when you go there. These are all the forms I ever needed when going there. You may be there a long time, but you will get everything done.

## **Thank-You and Closing - 3 min**

* Ask any additional follow up questions from #feedback-backchannel
* That's the end of my list of questions. Is there anything we talked about today that you have additional thoughts you want to share? What is the VetSuccess? My understanding, those are located on college campus. That is a place they could go to get advice or guidance they may need on campus. Oh, okay my son has been there and has dealt with them before. UC San Francisco.

We really appreciate you taking the time to share your thoughts with us today. Your feedback is so helpful to us as we continue to work on the site and make sure it really works for Veterans.

Thank you again, and I hope you enjoy the rest of your day.

**Observer Notes**

* Not surprised that the main source of information was another veteran
* “One-stop shop” – find the quote
  + Is that unique to this location, are other places as complete?
* He was very old school – pen and paper – wants in-person visits
* Greeters at the door to help with wayfinding
* His understanding of the different facilities was based on his experiences
  + Satellite office -> example
* Filling out the PDF and getting multiple signatures
  + How that does it work
* State school or private -> why does that matter
* “Five-star rating” – find quote
* Camp Pendleton – Pre-Discharge and Satellite
* TAPS program
* VetSucess on Campus -> son has probably worked with one, but doesn’t know the brand
* VSO event participation -> outreach activities
* Forms
  + How these relate back to services
* State specific -> noting
* Drives further because better services
* He goes first thing in the morning -> walk-in
* Multiple visits to the facility
* Learned about the education timing at the facility -> look for quote
* Staffing at satellite offices
* “Got someone on the phone for him”
* Yes/no question phrasing