**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?" I am okay with you recording.

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

* Can you tell me a little about yourself and your relationship to the VA? I SERVED 89 – 93, as I was transitioning out, I had some old Veterans telling me that if I had any claims, now was the time. That was the last time I interacted with the VA.

## **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, last week actually.
* In your own words, could you briefly describe the reason for your visit to that office? I was two other Veterans and were talking about some of our aches and pains and he asked if I had talked to my VA rep. Told him I don’t have one and he got be connected with someone who could help me.
* [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? I have some other pains that I think are service related and I wanted to get more information on the benefits I may be eligible for.
* Before visiting the office, did you try to complete this task via another method (phone, online, etc.)? Yeah. I emailed a rep that was in a different town, she gave me a name to contact. I pulled that up online and they gave me times and appointment times that I could come in. I ended up leaving because I was waiting for so long because I did not have an appointment. I ended up making an appointment and coming back at a later time.
  + 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? Again, from talking to other Veterans.
  + Skip or rephrase based on answers baseline questions
* When you were preparing, did you research any other benefit office locations? No, it was just the closest.
  + If so, what factors led you to pick one over another?
* What sources did you consult to get ready for your visit?
  + Did you talk to any VA employees?
    - Did you speak to anyone who works at this location?
  + Did you talk to other Veterans/beneficiaries?
  + Did you call a phone number?
  + Did you look at the website?
* What information did you gather from these sources? I legit it was two cops I was talking to. One of them pulled out a card with the rep he uses. I didn’t know anything other than that. They told me to do it and I did it.
  + Directions? Hours?
  + Details about benefit services/tasks?
* What tasks did you complete before your appointment?
  + Making an appointment?
  + Any paperwork forms?
* Did you feel prepared for your visit? Yeah. The only thing she told me to bring was my DD-214. She took information off that and started my package. She told me she had to wait to hear back prior to her continuing to help me. She told me next time to bring medical records.
  + 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 wish I would have made the appointment instead of just walking in.

## **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? Outside of Richmond.
  + How far away is that from where you live? 8 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?
* Did you have any issues getting to the building (directions, parking, etc.)? No. No was with me.
  + 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? There is a receptionist there that signed me in and walked me to her office.
  + Was there any signage that guided you?
  + Did you speak with any employees? (e.g., receptionist)
  + 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?
* Was there anything you wish you had on that day that would have made your visit easier? Again, I shouldn’t have walked in. I don’t remember if that is on the website. Making an appointment seemed difficult so I just decided to walk in.

## **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?
  + 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? If I could do it online, phone, and in-person. It seems like if you are going to call anybody you have to wait on hold forever. I just waited 10 minutes to make an appointment. If there is just a way to pull it up online, you can do that day or night and it is super easy.
  + Rank 1st, 2nd, 3rd
* Is there any information specific to this task/benefit that you wish you had before your visit?
* [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?
  + What other tasks might be completed here?
* 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: No.
  + Satellite Benefit Office: I am assuming that is where I went.
  + Integrated Disability Evaluation System Site: No.
  + Pre-Discharge Site: Is that when you are transitioning? I am sorry that is what I would think so.
  + Veteran Readiness and Employment Office: No.
  + VetSuccess On Campus: No.
* 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 am assuming Vet Success on Campus would be on a college campus and that is for those going to school, otherwise I do not know the connection.
    - For example, have you ever been referred from one office to another?
* Are you involved in any Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs)? Yeah, American Legion. I would go through my Vet Rep. There wasn’t anything specific I was looking for. I read the newspapers in print on Sunday because I find information that I may not be looking for, but I want to take in. I hope that helps you understand me more.
  + If you wanted to learn more about VSOs in your area, where would you look?
* What are your thoughts on chatbots on the websites? I would be more put off by that. If I am going online, I know what I am looking for or have an idea on what I am looking for. If I don’t know what I am looking for I will just go in and talk to someone in person.
* Going in is the only way to talking to person directly, is that the only way you feel comfortable talking to someone? Yes.

## **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? I appreciate what you guys are doing trying to make the system better. I don’t have anything else to offer.

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.