**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.

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

* Can you tell me a little about yourself and your relationship to the VA? I was active-duty 1989-99 got injured when I was in. in 2017, I filed for disability and ended up getting awarded some disability. I haven’t had much more experience. I went by the regional office to ask some questions. That is about it.

## **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 didn’t call prior to going there. I walked in. It was really just a horrible experience. The 3 people behind the desk they were talking about a party that was coming up and after 30 seconds of me standing there they finally acknowledged me. All they kept telling me nope, I just felt like I was there wasting their time. I went there to see if I could get copies of some things, but their copier was down. It was just not a positive experience.
* [Confirm benefit-related service(s)] Okay, so just to confirm, it sounds like this visit was related to [benefit type], correct? Yes.
  + 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 was looking for to see if they could get me a copy of my case file, but they can not do that. I was trying to find out if my disability was static and the folks wanted nothing to do with me. I felt like I was interrupting their conversation that had nothing to do with the VA. When they finally acknowledged me, they gave me 20 seconds and wanted me gone.
* Before visiting the office, did you try to complete this task via another method (phone, online, etc.)? I did check the website, and I did try calling and I was on hold forever. I think after 30 minutes of being on hold I gave up. The website did not have what I was looking for, or I could not find it. The same information if I could get copies and if my disability was static.
  + 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? Probably when I got the disability, I knew there was a Reginal Office in North Carolina so I Googled it to get the address and contact information. I don’t recall what website.
  + Skip or rephrase based on answers baseline questions
* When you were preparing, did you research any other benefit office locations? I knew the Veteran Service office couldn’t do anything with the case file, and there are different forums that I am a part of that stated that it was a hit or miss with going to a Regional Office. It is 4 hours away from me, but I was already there for personal reasons.
  + 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? It was a 1-800 number.
  + Did you look at the website? I think I just did a search for the regional offices for North Carolina and the one in Greensboro is the one that popped up.
* What information did you gather from these sources?
  + 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? I thought I was. Just a couple easy questions.
  + 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 guess I wish that information was easier found out there. It may be but I haven’t found it. After answering a few questions on the forum, I found out the VSOs could help me find out the status on my disability. I just wish there was more information out there that the Veterans are looking for. When you first get out you have everything, but it has been 20+ years since I gotten out and I have no idea where all that stuff is.

## **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? Greensboro, North Carolina.
  + How far away is that from where you live? 4-hour drive.
* How did you travel to the office? By car.
  + 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.)? Parking was a little difficult because it was a federal building. I had to keep circling the block and then I was able to find something. I was by myself.
  + Was the address and hours accurately represented? The address I had took me directly to the building.
* Once you were inside the building, how did you find your way to the floor/room you needed? After going through the security folks, they directed me straight ahead. I think they were marshals. It had a glass front, and you could not miss what it was. Once I walked in you couldn’t miss it because they directed you directly to it.
  + 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? No, not that would have helped me that day.

## **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? No, not with them at all. I did get my sheet for the codes and what was static and such. I am still waiting to receive my case file from the VSO. The county has some VSOs that work for them. I contacted them and they said they could get that for me.
  + 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? Just waiting. Back in January I went through the VSOs and went through the Freedom Act to get those records. They told me it would take me 6-8 months because they are backed up from Covid. I thought since I was in the area I would try.
* Have you heard of a Satellite office? Not that I know of. I know we have a clinic and in Wilmington they have a VA hospital. The VSO was the only thing near me.
* Can you tell me the difference between the disability rating? If your disability is determined static, you don’t have to come back for those issues. Those are just one of those things that sit in the back of your mind. I just want to know where you stand.
* How did you hear about those static benefits? It was through Reddit; they have a forum on there about Veterans’ benefits. They have people on there that run the stuff and have some good explanation of all the disability. They have a wealth of information on there. I believe it is called Veterans’ Benefits. They have a lot of really good information. There are some YouTube channels that I have watched as well, but I could not tell you what those are called.
* If you had the option of completing this task online / by phone / or in-person, what would your preferences be? Probably online, in-person, and then on phone. Telephone you don’t get anything in writing. Online with today’s technology it is really easy. I think with all the security all that information should be available for that person, and in person you just have that distance you have to drive.
  + 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? I don’t have any idea.
  + 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: No, I haven’t.
  + Integrated Disability Evaluation System Site: Nope, that is the first time I have seen it.
  + Pre-Discharge Site: I am guessing it has to do when you are being discharged. You have an hour when the VA comes in during our transition back to civilian life.
  + Veteran Readiness and Employment Office: Nope.
  + VetSuccess On Campus: Not in those words. I don’t think. Back when I was doing college, I had a person that was there that helped with all the VA benefits. Trying to ensure I was successful and was making the progress to have my benefits continue. It has been a while since I done school.
* 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?
    - For example, have you ever been referred from one office to another?
* Are you involved in any Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs)? No.
  + If you wanted to learn more about VSOs in your area, where would you look? Yes, I have the email and telephone number with the lady who I have had communication with for 5 years.
  + Have you participated in any VA events? No.
  + Have you ever heard of Vet Center Coffee? Nope.

## **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 think these, what we are doing here, are really good that you are reaching out and trying to figure out what is going on through the Veteran’s point of view. VA has come a long was, but there is still a long way to go.

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.