**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?" Yeah, sure. Yes.
* **Notes:** I have another colleague named David Shannon who would like to join, is that okay with you? Yes

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

* Can you tell me a little about yourself and your relationship to the VA? Well, I just recently retired in April from the army. I am medically retired. So pretty much the whole med board thing in the army, once you reach a certain point, which is about 6 months, on a medical profile, and if that doesn’t get any better than that profile and your medical stuff will get reviewed to see if you are going to get med boarded out of the army. That goes through a whole long process of doctors and boards, and they give you a thumbs up or a thumbs down on if you are going to stay in the army or not based off the medical condition. Then you go through the whole IDES process where they’re the ones that take you like step by step through the med board process and what you are putting in a claim for disability so they track all of that and your initial disability in what the VA might give you. Then they keep track of all of the paperwork and approval saying yeah, I will take that disability as far as a percentage.
* You are in the system already and then you can move on with whatever you want to do with your life.
* Some people have to go the med board (medical board) when filing for disability.
* That’s where the initial part was. You sit down with a rep at the military installation to enroll you into the VA benefits based on what you need
* After I was fully out, I was able to connect with Syracuse VA here in New York and a location clinic here in NY. That was been so/so as far as medical care goes.
* That’s my initial background with the VA
* Medical board saying that you are medically discharged. I have 80% from the VA and 70% from the DOD. So, my medical retirement from DOD is like $1,100 a month based on the highest three years of your pay.
* So basically, what happens when you reach a certain timeframe with a certain medical issue, it gets sent up to the Med Board.

The guy I had was not really, idk how heavy his case load was with soldiers, but it seemed like you were just a number. Then you would try to follow up with him on you know how the process is going and things of that nature and you would have to remind him of who you were and of what your disabilities were and why you’re being med boarded. I know other people who went through the IDES system, and they talked to their counselors on like almost a daily basis or weekly basis.

Take your copy of the form to them when I retired from fort drum, you take a copy of your DD-214 and they are supposed to give it to the VA but that never happened. I waited roughly two weeks after I got the DD-214 form for the VA to. when am I going to get my disability pay, full disability letter so I can utilize that, so I reached out to the VA reps, and said hey you guys never got my DD-214 or orders, so a big shit storm happened where this guy from the VA sent some wordy emails back to the IDES here at fort drum saying what’s the deal. My counselor reached out to me and told me to send my DD-214 form to the VA rep. that’s not how it’s supposed to be done. In that whole system you had to rely on yourself. And if you don’t follow up with people, it all just gets lost in the sauce. So, I said I would wait 2 weeks until I followed up with the VA to see If they received my forms. He would only need me when he needed me, but I would go in and update him on my progress with the VA. And I pretty much did everything by myself.

## **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?
  + the day I cleared fort drum so it would be in February cause that’s when I had to drop off all my paperwork. my clearing paperwork. My DD-214. That was the main thing they needed from me. Like I said that was the last time that I spoke with that guy. I waited a little over two weeks to see if that info was updated with the VA. The resource is still there for me, but I don’t really need it anymore because I have access to the VSO. Those guys usually deal with the active soldiers before they get out.
* In your own words, could you briefly describe the reason for your visit to that office?
* [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.)?
  + Follow up to understand how they came to decide that visiting the office was the best way to complete the task
  + Mostly face to face. The hardest part was getting my medical records from civilian providers. I had to go in. the lady that was there was very helpful. She tried to reach out to doctors to receive paperwork. He never answered the telephone., he gave me two phone numbers and neither of them worked.
  + 95% of the communication was in person.

## **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?
  + Skip or rephrase based on answers baseline questions
  + It was through the medical board system. There was a liaison that is directly replated to the medical board, so she does the admin stuff for that kind of nature. I would call her, and she would tell me the results. They direct my info to the IDS program and then whatever counselor picks up my paperwork is how I get seen. That was back in November 2021. I got my paperwork done before the holidays. The scheduling was kinda iffy at that time. I had to travel like two hours to see those doctors.
* When you were preparing, did you research any other benefit office locations?
  + The med board provided all of that for me. They were initially DOD people.
  + My whole packet gets sent over to the IDES, then whatever counselor picks up your paperwork and then you have a briefing of how everything will work. You get a cool flow chart that shows you how everything is supposed to be done.
  + *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?
  + 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?
  + Around 5 months I was in that system, day September timeframe through January. Trying to get the appointments with the civilian doctors was the main thing going on in that 5-month period. The writeups got sent to the DOD reps that overlooked the whole percentage thing.
  + I had to wait a couple extra weeks about what was approved or disapproved because of the holidays.
  + From that point on I took my whole packet and sat down with the VA lawyers to see if you could get a higher rating. I already had 80%.
  + I had my discharge orders printed and ready to go.
  + It was a very fast, streamline after those appointments were completed.
  + As for that office, he had a different personality for how he works.
  + Flowchart was from the DOD. There was some VA stuff in there. “You might get your ratings on day 100” or so on. Most useful: pretty good accurate timeline of what to expect and how long it would take. It varies based on the solider too. I claimed 13 different things on my form. So, I had 6-8 appointments for medical things I was claiming. These doctors travel to specific locations. Its not like they have their offices in this area. Yeah, but the timeline itself was pretty accurate. Within weeks or months and stuff like that.
  + 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?

## **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?
* Off Fort Drum, NY
  + How far away is that from where you live?
    - Uh let’s see, I live about 16 miles away.
* How did you travel to the office?
  + Method of transportation (car/bus, etc.)?
    - Car
  + Wayfinding/directions (landmarks, GPS, printed)?
* Did anyone accompany you on the visit?
  + I pretty much had to do everything on my own. Your chain of command leaves you alone once you are in that system so you can do what you gotta do.
* Did you have any issues getting to the building (directions, parking, etc.)?
  + Was the address and hours accurately represented?
    - yes
* Once you were inside the building, how did you find your way to the floor/room you needed?
  + Was there any signage that guided you?
  + Did you speak with any employees? (e.g., receptionist)
    - You have to write yourself in and they chart that from your time into your time out.
  + Was there a waiting area of any kind?
    - I showed up 10 minutes prior. If it was at 9 in the morning, I was seen at 9 in the morning.
  + How did you know when you were at the right place?
* Did you have a pre-scheduled appointment, or did you just walk-in?
  + I had an appointment. The initial appointment was scheduled in the initial process. The next appts were scheduled with the receptionist.
  + There were not a lot of scheduled appts, it was a lot of walk-ins. When he would get results, he would say hey man when are you available to come in?
* Was there anything you wish you had on that day that would have made your visit easier?
  + No; worst part was getting all of those records from the civilians. I think 2 of the 4 offices were closed and they never opened again. Only one I was able to get was from the emergency room. The dermatologist office was shut down and they never opened again.

## **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?
  + No, that was the only way.
* If you had the option of completing this task online / by phone / or in-person, what would your preferences be?
  + Rank 1st, 2nd, 3rd
    - 1st: face to face, 2nd: telephone, 3rd: email. I’m not an email person.
    - Face to face is number one because this is such an important process. You are being discharged from the army. I’ve never gone through this process before, and they are supposed to be the experts. Its your career in the end. You’re getting discharged for medical issues, got it. You would want to get a warmer feeling about your counselor at first. So, id say face to face is the most beneficial to see how they work and how they operate and how they prevent the materials. The guy I had just presented a big packet and pretty much said just to read it.
* 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: The one I dealt with is in Buffalo, NY. Everything I usually get from buffalo. I’m doing another masters in sports management and it is going to be coaching related. Idk if that office will change when I move to PA at the end of the month. Yeah, I usually only get the initial stuff from the medical side came out of there too.
  + Satellite Benefit Office: Syracuse. I’ve heard about it, yeah. I usually get everything out of Buffalo.
  + Integrated Disability Evaluation System Site: Heard of it.
  + Pre-Discharge Site: Never heard of it.
  + Veteran Readiness and Employment Office: Yeah, that one is out of buffalo too. I did the initial steps to apply, and they sent me the forms and it’s like reinventing the wheel of the IDES program. I was like screw this. They would assess it to see if I would be qualified or not and there were 8/9 pages of VA forms that I have to verify that I have those disabilities, so I said screw this, it is a waste of my time.
  + Why did you go there: I was Military Police in the Army and basically, I don’t want to be in law enforcement anymore. The VRE is a program where they can possibly, if you are qualified enough, set you up in a different career field with an internship, apprenticeship, or entry level in a different industry that you scored highly in. filled out a questionnaire to see what other working skills I like. I marked yes for teaching and coaching. Everything else was no, no, no. Another education benefit offset of the GI Bill If you were to do a paid internship you would get a certain percentage of money a month. Looking into it because it’s another benefit that you could possibly get if you don’t want to go back into the same field you were in the military. They’ll train you, find you employment, or education in field you might qualify for. I was just looking in my email and all those forms were ridiculous. This one is a 6-page VA form for readiness employment. They have all your admin stuff and then your background information. It asks for civilian work experience, I just got out of the army I don’t have any civilian experience. Then you have to justify your disabilities that you just applied for and were approved for. I haven’t really heard of anyone else actually getting into this program. I haven’t heard much usage out of it, uhm, at all so.
  + VetSuccess On Campus: I seen that somewhere before but not really up to speed on that. But I saw that somewhere before.
* Relationship between VRE and Regional benefit office: VRE and regional that’s where everything gets processed. Or approved or disapproved. That’s where all of the checks and balances are for everything of how those two are connected together. Seems like that’s more the approving authority of things. That’s how I look at it.
* 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)?
  + I just looked into DAV; it’s a membership so you can do a lifetime membership or a monthly membership. That’s the main one I’m looking into. Uhm and probably VAW too and things of that nature too. I need to get somewhere that I’m stable living for a while and not jumping all over the place to be part of something so once I get settled in PA. that’s probably what I’m going to reach out and do. there’s a lot where I am going. You can go on fishing trips and camping trips.
  + If you wanted to learn more about VSOs in your area, where would you look?
    - I’m going to reach out to the first thing I’m going to do is get in the medical system down there. My last appt here is October 23rd and within an hour they’ll put you in the system in PA. I reached out last month to see how that process goes. So, I’ll go to Wilkes barre, PA and the satellite medical center will be where I will be living.

## **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?
  + Medical system: I think the behavioral health portion of the VA is broken; I think. Not enough counselors. A lot of psychiatrists who will prescribe medication. “it’s going to be okay” is all they say, and I am sick of hearing it’s all going to be okay. The psychiatrist was supposed to put in a referral for a new counselor, but I have not seen that yet. Them doing all of these not in person sit-downs, everything has to be through telephone or video conference is not personable for me. If you want to talk about your personal issues its more professional to do that in face.
  + I speak to my psychiatrist twice a month.
  + Referrals are being waited on that the VA cannot provide. It has been months and months waiting on a referral for a dentist to replace my cap. Other referrals for my lower back issues, just in general the timeframe is way too long. 2-3 months where you are trying to see a specialist your issues are probably getting much worse. Even when I was with the DOD system, they thought medications were the end all be all but there are lot more ways to help someone out besides medications.

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.