**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? They have taken forever to change my last name. I have cancer and I am being seen at the VA for my cancer treatments. I am also talking to the VA about my education benefits.

## **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? It was fairly quick. I walked in. I wanted to see the benefit counselor, they told me they were not available, and they told me to make an appointment to come back. I was helping my husband with his disability and my education benefits.
* [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.)? Nobody answers the phone, and when I tried to do it online you feel like it is lost. I feel better when I go because it is like you see them stamp it and get it started.
  + 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? Oh, you are talking about almost 15 years ago. I think I was doing a claim and they told me they have an office. The lady in the front made the appointment and told me where to go. I had an issue with my claim and the lady working for the VA told me I could go in and talk to someone. It was a long time ago.
  + Skip or rephrase based on answers baseline questions
* When you were preparing, did you research any other benefit office locations? No, I am pretty much familiar with the hours. They have a cut off time that they stop seeing people. I know they stop seeing people at 3:00pm, so they will turn you away. I was still turned away because no one was there that day.
  + If so, what factors led you to pick one over another?
* What sources did you consult to get ready for your visit? No.
  + 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? It was for one and the other I was told I could go online.
  + Making an appointment?
  + Any paperwork forms?
* Did you feel prepared for your visit? I felt prepared. We felt prepared.
  + 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 known they were doing training that day because I wouldn’t have come.

## **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? Clairmont Road near the VA hospital.
  + How far away is that from where you live? 30 minutes.
* How did you travel to the office? 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.)? No, I didn’t. I went with my husband.
  + 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 security when you come through the front doors. They are right there. There is a reception that will tell you where you need to go. Unfortunately, there were no people there for what we needed to do. They told us it would be best if we made an appointment to ensure they are there when we go.
  + 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? Gas money.

## **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.
  + 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? Online. When you do it online, I put in a request to reconsider something and instead of me getting a phone call I got a letter in the mail they stated they needed something. When I called to get clarification, I got no answer. You still find yourself trying to get there in person so you can get clarification. Doing it online is doing an extra step when the extra step does not mean anything.
* If you had the option of completing this task online / by phone / or in-person, what would your preferences be? Depending on what the task was I would rather do it online if I trusted it would get done properly, phone, then in person. I would rather do in person last so I would not have to leave the area that I am in.
  + 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: I would expect it to deal with regional issues. Helping individuals within their region. That would be any issues that is not healthcare.
  + Satellite Benefit Office: Yes, I have, but the only one I have been to the person who is supposed to be there is never there. That is in Greensboro, GA.
  + Integrated Disability Evaluation System Site: Nope.
  + Pre-Discharge Site: No.
  + Veteran Readiness and Employment Office: I have heard of it but have never been there.
  + VetSuccess On Campus: No.
* When you made the appointment, did you make it there or did you make it online? I tried to make it there but the date I needed for they told me it was unavailable. I was frustrated so I told them I would call later. I never did.
* 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? No.
    - For example, have you ever been referred from one office to another?
* Are you involved in any Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs)? Yes. American Legion, VFW, The Mission Continues, Soldiers’ Angels, and Minority Veterans.
  + If you wanted to learn more about VSOs in your area, where would you look?

## **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? It would be cool if we could get online and pull our information without it slowing down. It feels like it is down for maintenance. It would be helpful because every couple year it changes. A lot of people are not getting that information because it changes so often. It is just a little frustrating. Some of the older Veterans are waiting for snail mail and that never comes.

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.