**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 was in the Navy for 28 years, I retired from the Navy, I am a daughter of two Veterans of the Navy, and I have been using Veterans’ services since 2012.

## **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? Correct, I was going for a medical appointment, and I was able to schedule a regional office appointment which is right next to it. I just needed to update some information since returning from living overseas.
* In your own words, could you briefly describe the reason for your visit to that office? Somewhere along the way my name was misspelled and when I went to get a prescription, they pointed out that my name in the system and on my card was not matching. I also wanted to get my educational benefits/ refresher on what my options were for the GI Bill. The third thing was when I retired the individual who did my DD-214 told me I did not need to list every combat service and now I am getting that fix with their help.
* [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.)? So, the name thing I have been tackling since I joined the Navy and then with the VA since 2012. Long story short I could not get that done over the phone because I needed to bring in supporting documents.
* The disability and DD-214 I did a lot of research online, but there was information I just was unsure they were asking for. The person helping me told me those documents were not needed and I could use another type of document. Having that verbal in person meeting was nice. I never tried to do that online. The education benefits I am just getting back to that, but I am not there yet.
  + 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? I don’t know if I have been there before. I know I have been to others before, but the only reason I knew that was there was before I had seen it on my way to the medical clinic.
  + Skip or rephrase based on answers baseline questions
* When you were preparing, did you research any other benefit office locations?
  + If so, what factors led you to pick one over another? I don’t know I really grasped in until I came back to the United States. One stop shopping is why I picked this one. I knew I could do everything in this office. I did some researching, and you could click on a toggle and this one popped up with everything I needed to handle I could do it at this site.
* What sources did you consult to get ready for your visit? No, I think most of it was done through the website.
  + 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? Yes, and setting up appointments.
  + Directions? Hours?
  + Details about benefit services/tasks?
* What tasks did you complete before your appointment? I made one appointment for 3 tasks, and I think I had to make a comment that I wanted to take care of all of the issues.
  + Making an appointment?
  + Any paperwork forms? I think there was an online pop-up window I had to answer but that is all I had to do.
* Did you feel prepared for your visit? I was prepared for what I needed to bring, but I didn’t know what type of questions he would ask.
  + Were you prepared, or was there a surprise when you got to the office?
* Is there anything else you wish you had known before your visit? How easy it would have been. I would have done it earlier if I would have known.

## **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? Mission Valley, central San Diego area.
  + How far away is that from where you live? 22 miles
* How did you travel to the office? POV
  + Method of transportation (car/bus, etc.)?
  + Wayfinding/directions (landmarks, GPS, printed)?
* Did anyone accompany you on the visit? No.
* Did you have any issues getting to the building (directions, parking, etc.)? No, I knew where it was generally. All smooth
  + 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? When I walked in, I went through a metal detector, and security person told me to go to my left. There was a clear sign that said check in here.
  + 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? They did have me fill out another form while I was there. I could have done that form at home, but it was not a big deal. It was a general intake form.

## **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 believe so, but I still have not been able to see that reflect in the system. They did warn me it could take 30 days. I have tried to change this prior other ways as well.
* Education: we talk through what benefits I had used before this meeting because I had given my son some of my benefits, he told me how much I had left, how to apply that at my school, walked me through forms, and he recommended me contact another individual to help me get my benefits at that school. I was just learning was the next steps were. I wanted to know what benefits that were specific to me as the Veteran. I know there is a way, but I did not think to look at what my balance was. They sent me some information on other school programs I may qualify for, and how to stretch my benefits to get the most out of it. Learning what choices, I should be making regarding the program.
* Disability: The VA can not update the form, he gave me the correct form to help me get it corrected at the right location, he walked me through the paperwork and how to fill it out correctly to ensure that I can get my DD-214 updated. It is a different department that has to update that for me. I think they have changed the program since I have retired, you fill out all the documents, and I wish there was a firewall for the admin typing it in to tell them that they need to place all the information in correctly so the Veteran can get all benefits that they could qualify for.
  + 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? Online, by phone as long as I could mail in proof of identity, in-person.
* Education: Online or by phone. Yes, three with one stone type of thing.
* Disability: That one I would have done on the phone because I don’t think you could do that online. It is so personalized for each Veteran. There is a lot of if then statements. Just talking the variables out loud. Maybe there is a way to get the general questions. Probably online, phone, and then in person but I am not sure you could do it with the first two. Perfect world, magic world.
  + Rank 1st, 2nd, 3rd
* Is there any information specific to this task/benefit that you wish you had before your visit? No because it was just one of those weird things. It is not common like marriage or divorce. I think I did all the firebreaks I could prior to retirement, but I think it is something that was not avoidable.
* Education: I think I would have been better prepared if I would have known how much benefits I had left. I have been able to do research now that I know how much benefits I have left.
* Disability: I knew there was nothing the VA could do, but I knew they could tell me what is wrong.
* [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
  + Satellite Benefit Office
  + Integrated Disability Evaluation System Site
  + Pre-Discharge Site
  + Veteran Readiness and Employment Office
  + VetSuccess On Campus
* 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)?
  + 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?

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.