**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 am retired from the Navy, and I have used the VA for educational benefits and also, I am in the process for a disability claim.

## **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?
* In your own words, could you briefly describe the reason for your visit to that office? I was trying to get information on, I’ve going through this since I have retired, it is confusing. I have been to both of those trying to get information on my disability claim.
* [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.)? I had started the process once and that got put over to, and I have gone through the office in Baltimore. This is the way I understand it you can do it yourself or go to the DAV. The initial piece went through the DAV they sent it through the mail, but I did not get that because I was out of town. I have gone through the VA sites, the person at the VA told me I had to send a letter to the DAV telling them that the VA is now handling it. The health clinic told me that I need to go back to the DAV to get that done because they do not do that in the clinic. When you are out-processing you go through different things and a guy from the DAV was there.
  + 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? One is a VA home and the clinic there is a big sign that says it is a VA clinic, so I saw that just living in the community.
  + Skip or rephrase based on answers baseline questions
* When you were preparing, did you research any other benefit office locations? No, I just looked online and that was the closest one to my location. I get things in the mail all the time, and I got a list of all the clinics in the area.
  + If so, what factors led you to pick one over another?
* What sources did you consult to get ready for your visit? I had gone there because this is called a VA clinic and the other was a VA home and they are about half a mile apart. The other guy was just very hard to get in touch with. He never called back. I don’t know if he is a VA employee, but he is the only guy that could take your disability claim. He was the one telling what I needed to do with the DAV. You couldn’t just drop in because of Covid. I did the process of getting away from the DAV to him, but it took 3 years.
  + 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? Yes, because I have binders full of all my medical records, it just took forever to get the medical records. I have a 1-800 number and they would just keep telling me it would be soon never a timeline. I was just confused because when I went to the VA I was told go back to the DAV when I took 2 years to get away from them. It just takes a long time because the DAV has difficult hours because it is an all-volunteer place.
  + 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? About 25 minutes.
  + How far away is that from where you live?
* How did you travel to the office? I drove my 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.)? It is easy to find, you can Google it. No issue with parking.
  + 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? It is a nice new building, lovely lady up front willing to help.
  + 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? I just popped in. I had preloaded all my medical records in my car and popped in when I was in the area. I found out the hours through the website.
* Was there anything you wish you had on that day that would have made your visit easier? No. I wasn’t there very long because she told me I needed to go back to the DAV because they could not help me. It was a short conversation.

## **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? Not at the VA, but it just got completed 2 years later at the DAV.
  + 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? In-person, phone, and then online. What it is, it is not a VA. Here is what I was doing I am enrolled in the University of Louisville, when you put in your financial aid page, it is a combination of VA and University of Louisville. Zoom is not a bad way to communicate, and they could walk me through on Zoom. Now that I think of it Zoom may be better than in person because you may forget something, and you would have that in your computer.
  + 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 guess it is a Regional Benefit Office near me. It looks like there is 7 of them throughout Maryland.
  + Satellite Benefit Office: I can take a guess. I was at an event, and they had a VA pop up there. Is that what you are talking about? My view it is a pop-up or a truck/van a mobile VA unit.
  + Integrated Disability Evaluation System Site: I have no idea what that is.
  + Pre-Discharge Site: I have heard of it, but not in relation to the VA. It is a sit when you are getting out of the military.
  + Veteran Readiness and Employment Office: I think so. Obviously, there are a bunch of Veteran employment online. Not sure if that is related or not.
  + VetSuccess On Campus: I don’t know if I have heard that term. I have had a whole orientation on campus, and it did mention things about Veterans.
* 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)? Well, the DAV, I am a member of the DAV, and I am member of a lot of stuff I just don’t know if they are VSOs. I am a member of Reserves Officers Associations, but I am not sure if they are VSOs.
  + If you wanted to learn more about VSOs in your area, where would you look?
* You said you worked with the DAV, and they told you to go to the VA? No, I initially went through the DAV because when I went through my retirement process, I talked to the DAV and so I went with them to file my claim. When I came back from out of town it said I had appointments, and I called the 1-800 number to tell them I just got home and needed to reschedule, and they told me I had already missed my appointment.

## **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 could say to a T that everyone that I have talked to within the system have been very nice. The only person that told me they could not help me was the contractor for the VA. Otherwise, that is it. I appreciate it.

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.