**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 a 61-year-old male disable Veteran. Non-combat. I currently have a 40%disability rating and multiple other medical issues even though they are not service connected. Medical center in my primary insurance.

## **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.
* In your own words, could you briefly describe the reason for your visit to that office? It is a bit cumbersome. It was primarily to find out what I heard about, the 20-year rule. If you have a disability rating of 20 years or more, they can not reduce it. I asked about it and they were not sure, so they sent me to someone who could answer my question. I talked to him at the Satellite office, and he suggested to resubmit my claims. At this point I have no idea where we are in the process. No way to track the progress. No contact information was given because they are just gathering the information to pass it forward. No additional contact or feedback.
* [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.)? No, I was checking around on YouTube and came across someone who was retired who was talking about the regional office. That is where I found out about the 20-year rule and other disability issues. The VA has denied my claim for my back disability.
  + 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 had been there before because it is in the Satellite Office in the Department of Labor I had been there before when I got laid off. I Googled map to remind me of where it is at. Satellite I have in my phone, so I just had to click on the contact info and it popped up in my Google Maps.
  + Skip or rephrase based on answers baseline questions
* When you were preparing, did you research any other benefit office locations? Regional Benefit Office is Boise Idaho, and Caldwell is where Satellite Benefit Office.
  + 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? No, those guys are pretty good about all that stuff. When I set up the appointment, he had an idea of what I was coming in with. I asked him if I needed to bring anything in with me, he told me no. If he needed something he could request it online, very rarely did I need to come home and grab records from home. Whoever is setting up the appointment will tell me if I need to bring anything.
  + Making an appointment?
  + Any paperwork forms?
* Did you feel prepared for your visit? Yeah, I am always nervous when I go talk to these folks when I am talking about a pay raise for me. If what he is saying is possible at this point it could be raised, it would be the bare minimum of being consider unemployable. I meet that because I have not worked since 2012.

Were they doing the record look up on the web or through the system? From what I understand they did it through the system. That is what it sounded like. It sounded like he could access what he needed to access.

* + 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?
  + How far away is that from where you live?
* 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?
* Did you have any issues getting to the building (directions, parking, etc.)? Once I know where I am going, I am good. Since I am handicapped, I look up front for the handicap spots. I had been there before for my unemployment. I went by myself.
  + 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 you walk in you have to show ID and sign in. You know you are there because the Department of Labor folks ask me why I am there, and they tell me where to 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? It was an appointment that was made at the Regional Benefit Office.
* Was there anything you wish you had on that day that would have made your visit easier? Nope, I didn’t need anything.

## **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?
* If you had the option of completing this task online / by phone / or in-person, what would your preferences be?
  + 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? If you need to find out about this item, they will point you to the right individual at the right location for certain issues. They will cross connect to help you. Some of the other things I wanted to do is setting up wills, living trusts, and things of that nature. The thing about going to the regional office is that is where all the information is available. The only issue is I have never seen a printed directory of everyone and what they deal with.
  + 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: Nope. It looks like they would be evaluating disability claims.
  + Pre-Discharge Site: No.
  + Veteran Readiness and Employment Office: They are the ones who gave me the educational information.
  + VetSuccess On Campus: There was a program I could attend prior to beginning my classes to help me with my math.
* 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? They are both in the same location. I don’t know what else they would have. Without contacting the Regional office, you will not be able to get in contact with the others.
    - For example, have you ever been referred from one office to another?
* Are you involved in any Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs)? Yes, I was able to start a chapter at my university for the military 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?

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.