

# *Enabling Quality Improvement: Lessons from a VA National Collaborative*

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## **Background**

Compensation and pension (C&P) exams are the medical examination conducted by VA providers for determination of service-connected disability. The C&P examination reports are submitted to the Veterans Benefits Administration for approving and rating disabilities. The Secretary of Veterans Affairs Department has identified improving C&P claims processing as one of the agency's highest priorities. Secretary Principi has stated that compensation and pension claims processing is not a VBA or VHA problem, it is a VA problem that must be resolved cooperatively by both Administrations.

A critical goal shared by both Under Secretaries is to improve the compensation and pension examination process. To achieve that goal, a Memorandum of Agreement was executed on February 20, 2001, establishing the Compensation and Pension Examination Project (CPEP). VHA and VBA agreed to jointly fund and unite in this collaborative initiative to improve the compensation and pension examination process; identify and/or develop best practices; and disseminate those best practices to medical centers and regional offices.

The purpose of C&P examinations is to provide the medical information needed to reach a legal decision about a veteran's entitlement (or non-entitlement) to VA monetary benefits based on disability. A C&P examination report must provide specific information about numerous medical and social aspects of the disabling condition(s) to meet the medical/legal criteria contained in the VA rating schedule (38 CFR Part 4) for assigning and supporting a disability rating. .

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) performs 375,000 to 425,000 disability examinations per year, or approximately 90% of all those performed. Examinations are requested by (or on behalf of veterans) Rating Veterans Service Representatives (RSVRs) working at Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) regional offices across the country. Clinicians at VHA medical centers and clinics perform examinations and return reports to the requesting rating specialist. To guide collection and reporting of the required information by the examiner, disability-rating criteria are summarized as

elements of examination protocols (Automated Medical Information Exchange [AMIE] worksheets) for each of 56 categories of disability. Examiners are expected to use the AMIE worksheets as a guide in conducting and completing the disability examination and the examination report.

Quality is the number one issue surrounding VHA compensation and pension (C&P) examinations. In fact, the Under Secretaries for Health and Benefits signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) in February 2001 that states:

*“If performance measures are not achieved, a mechanism will be developed that will allow VBA to control the funding for compensation and pension examinations by administratively fencing off funds currently expended on compensation and pension examinations performed by VHA.”*

This national office of the Compensation and Pension Examination Program (CPEP) is chartered to improve the quality and timeliness of C&P examinations and customer satisfaction with the C&P examination process. CPEP responsibilities include baseline and continuous assessment of C&P examination quality and communication of results to provide feedback for performance improvement.

Historically, examination report quality has been measured as the percentage of reports returned by the requesting rating specialist to the examining site as “insufficient.” The examination insufficiency rate typically reported is between 1% and 2%. Because of widespread discontent with existing practice, CPEP has been charged with implementing a more objective quality assessment procedure. The measurement of compensation and pension examination quality in a credible, actionable way is a top priority for the CPEP Office. This includes determination of baseline performance and ongoing performance measurement. We have developed reliable and valid methodologies for measuring examination report quality as determined by the criteria stated in the examination worksheets and the rating regulations. This included elucidation and vetting of specific quality criteria; conducting a pilot study; developing data collection and management tools; and designing methods for acquiring examinations and requests for review.

The CPEP Office realizes that an innovative, systematic approach is required to meet the Departmental goal of improving compensation and pension examination quality. This approach involves:

- A new, valid system to measure examination quality that is being used by CPEP reviewers to conduct approximately 3,000 reviews of completed compensation and pension examinations per month.
- Elevating the priority of compensation and pension examination processes by incorporating quality improvement measures in VHA and VBA Leadership Performance Agreement Plans.
- Frontline field implementation strategies for VBA and VHA to bring about improvements using system-wide quality improvement collaborative breakthrough training series, facility-level compensation and pension examination quality improvement plans, continuing education and training, and information technology tools.

This presentation will tell the story of implementing a nation-wide quality improvement initiative with the objective of extracting key factors that will enable the success of quality improvement across an organization. The lessons learnt are proposed as QI principles underlying a new paradigm for organizational improvement. A power-point handout will be available on the web and at the presentation.