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OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

Office of Audits and Evaluations

VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION

Date of Receipt of Claims
and Mail Processing during
the COVID-19 National State
of Emergency

REVIEW

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Executive Summary

The VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) conducted this review to determine whether Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) staff

1. implemented VA guidance for documenting the date of receipt for benefits-related correspondence during the COVID-19 national state of emergency, as the date of receipt may establish when benefit entitlements begin;¹ and
2. continued to process mail received at VA facilities during the same period to ensure benefit claims were still being processed.²

On March 13, 2020, the President declared that the COVID-19 outbreak constituted a national emergency as of March 1, 2020.³ U.S. Postal Service (USPS) operations have continued during the pandemic. However, delays may occur if VBA regional offices have fewer staff available to receive and process the mail.

On April 6, 2020, VBA guidance noted dramatic alterations to operations were required to respond to the COVID-19 state of emergency. This guidance included changing the date of receipt for a claim from the date it was received at a VA facility to the postmark date. This guidance was effective March 1, 2020, and is set to expire 60 calendar days following the President's proclaimed end to the national state of emergency. In addition, the new guidance stated that if there was no postmark or date stamp by the mail carrier, VA would consider the receipt date as no later than February 29, 2020, for any correspondence with a VA date stamp during the national state of emergency.

Generally, when VA benefits are awarded, they are paid from the first day of the month following the effective date. For example, if VA were to grant benefits as of April 21, 2020 (the date of receipt for the veteran's claim), the effective date for payment would be May 1, 2020 (the first of the following month). Consequently, the effective date determination can have a direct impact on when benefit payments begin.

According to VBA, effective mail management is crucial to the success and control of its workflow. Centralized mail processing consolidates the receipt of VBA claims-related mail and was developed to expeditiously upload claims, evidence, and other mail to a veteran's eFolder in the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS), a web-based electronic program used to

¹ The review period extended from April 7 through April 20, 2020.

² Physical mail received by VBA regional offices may come from various external and VA-associated sources, including the US Postal Service, FedEx, United Parcel Service (UPS), in person at a local regional office public contact unit, veterans service organizations, and mail from VA satellite offices and medical facilities.

³ VBA, Policy Letter 20-02, "Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Claims and Appeals Processing Guidance," April 6, 2020.

process claims. As part of the centralized mail-processing system, mail received at VBA regional offices is sent to a consolidated scanning facility in Janesville, Wisconsin.

Support Services Divisions (SSDs) in regional offices are responsible for establishing local procedures for movement of all mail. It is the responsibility of the regional office to process and package mail to be sent to the scanning facility. Prior to being sent to the scanning facility, each document must be stamped with the date it was received.

VBA policy states that the assignment of an effective date is an integral part of the decision-making process as it establishes the date from which entitlement to and payment of benefits begin. The effective date is typically, but not always, the date of receipt of the claim.⁴ Prior to the COVID-19 national state of emergency, the date of receipt for mail was the date it was stamped by a VA facility. If the mail was sent directly by the veteran to a VBA scanning vendor, the date of receipt was the date applied to the scanned image by the vendor.

What the Review Found

The review team determined VBA staff did not implement date of receipt guidance for correspondence received during the COVID-19 national state of emergency. However, VBA staff continued to process mail received at VA facilities.

VBA Staff Did Not Implement New Guidance on Recording the Date of Receipt for Benefits-Related Correspondence

The review team determined VBA staff did not implement date of receipt guidance for correspondence received during the COVID-19 national state of emergency. The team reviewed a sample of 120 claims established from April 7 through April 20, 2020, to assess whether staff applied the correct date of receipt for the claims in VBMS. The team estimated VBA staff did not properly apply the date of receipt guidance in 98 percent of approximately 3,200 established claims during the review period. Specifically, VBA staff

- failed to use the postmark date of mail as the date of receipt,
- failed to use a date of receipt of February 29, 2020, when the postmark date was unavailable, and
- failed to document the reasons for estimates of date of receipt on mail with partially legible postmarks.

⁴ All information gathered during evidence review must be considered to determine whether a more specific effective date rule applies. Although the effective date may be the date of the receipt of the claim, the effective date is determined by a variety of factors, including date entitlement arose, date of veteran's discharge from military service, and legislative changes affecting entitlement to benefits. "Date entitlement arose" refers to the date on which the facts in the case demonstrate that the entitling criteria are first met.

As the date of receipt may be used as the date of entitlement for granted payments, claimants could potentially be underpaid if staff assigned an incorrect effective date based on an inaccurate date of receipt documented in VBMS. The team found VBA regional office staff were not always aware of all aspects of the new guidance, such as the requirement to use the postmark as the date of receipt for claims affected by the national state of emergency.⁵ VBA had a communication plan for the new policy that included providing a policy letter to VBA regional offices, holding a Compensation Service quality call with claims processors and managers, and the deputy under secretary for field operations discussing the policy with VBA managers. However, there was no training course specifically mandated to ensure VBA staff were aware of and understood the policy change. The deputy under secretary for field operations stated it was the responsibility of local leaders to ensure employees were notified of the policy. The deputy conceded training for staff to reinforce the guidance may be needed to ensure staff understood the policy. Most of the regional office staff interviewed by the review team acknowledged they had not received training or attended a team meeting to discuss the changes, and some were not sure if they had received the policy letter.

The review team also found that VBA had no plans to ensure all claims affected by the new guidance, but processed prior to the guidance being issued, were accurately completed. The new guidance for date of receipt processing was issued on April 6, 2020, but affected claims that were received on or after March 1, 2020. Therefore, claims received and completed from March 1 to April 6, 2020, are at risk of having an incorrect date of receipt applied and could lead to improper payments.

The review team interviewed the deputy executive director of policy and procedures to determine why the guidance directed staff to use a date of “no later than February 29, 2020,” rather than just the date of February 29, 2020, when a postmark was unavailable. She stated the intent was not for staff to use a date earlier than February 29, 2020, and that the guidance should be revisited. Per the deputy director of the Appeals Management Office, based on the “no later than” wording of the guidance, staff could potentially apply a date earlier than February 29, 2020.

The deputy executive director of policy and procedures also noted that when the guidance was established, it was not certain how long the national state of emergency would be in effect. If the national state of emergency is in effect for the remainder of the year, a claim received without a postmark in December 2020 would be assigned a date of receipt of February 29, 2020. In this scenario, a claimant would potentially receive payments effective 10 months prior to when the claim was actually submitted. For that reason, the deputy executive director of policy and procedures noted that using the date of February 29, 2020, would be worth revisiting.

⁵ The review team interviewed claims processors and managers at the Detroit, Michigan, and Los Angeles, California, VA regional offices in May 2020.

VBA Staff Were Able to Process Mail Despite the National State of Emergency

The review team determined VBA staff processed mail physically received at VA facilities during the COVID-19 national state of emergency. VBA noted that effective March 31, 2020, all VA mail received at and addressed to VBA regional offices would be forwarded by the USPS to the Janesville, Wisconsin, scanning facility. Mail intended for forwarding was not to include mail addressed to veterans service organizations colocated with the regional offices. VBA further noted regional offices colocated with VA medical centers, federal buildings, and the National Cemetery Association would not have their USPS mail forwarded. Per the deputy under secretary for field operations, offices that did not have mail automatically forwarded to the scanning facility were to have staff available to process the incoming mail. An interview with a program analyst with VBA's Office of Field Operations revealed that VBA had procedures in place to ensure mail erroneously received at the scanning facility intended for veterans service organizations would be provided to them. These documents could either be emailed or physically mailed to the veterans service organizations via UPS or FedEx.

The review team sent a survey to 57 regional office directors and 57 regional office SSD chiefs to determine how mail-processing operations were affected by the national state of emergency. The team received 94 responses out of a potential 114, obtaining a response rate of about 82 percent. Survey results indicated VBA staff found various methods to ensure mail operations continued, such as forwarding mail to the scanning facility and having staff periodically available on-site to process mail. The survey results were consistent with information received in interviews conducted with regional office directors, SSD chiefs, and representatives from veterans service organizations.

What the OIG Recommended

The OIG made the following recommendations to the under secretary for benefits:

1. Determine what additional actions are needed to make certain that staff understand how to accurately apply the most current guidance of the date of receipt recorded for claims received during the national state of emergency and implement those actions.
2. Conduct a review to ensure claims received and completed from March 1, 2020, had the correct date of entitlement applied.
3. Reevaluate guidance for the date of receipt recorded for claims without a postmark received during the national state of emergency.

Management Comments

The under secretary for benefits concurred with all recommendations and provided acceptable action plans. The full text of the under secretary's comments is contained in appendix D.



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Abbreviations

COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
FAQ	frequently asked questions
OIG	Office of Inspector General
SSD	Support Services Division
UPS	United Parcel Service
USPS	United States Postal Service
VBA	Veterans Benefits Administration
VBMS	Veterans Benefits Management System



Introduction

On March 13, 2020, President Trump declared that the COVID-19 outbreak constituted a national emergency, beginning March 1, 2020. United States Postal Service (USPS) operations have generally continued, allowing mail to be delivered to Veterans Benefit Administration (VBA) regional offices for processing, along with other correspondence from additional internal and external sources. However, limited physical staffing at VBA regional offices due to the national emergency could lead to delays in the ability of these regional offices to receive mail and process it timely.

The VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) conducted this review to determine whether VBA staff

1. implemented VA guidance for documenting the date of receipt for benefits-related correspondence during the COVID-19 national state of emergency, as the date of receipt may establish when benefit entitlements begin; and
2. continued to process mail received at VA facilities during the same period to ensure benefit claims were still being processed.

As the date of receipt may determine when payment of benefits begins, it is critical that VBA staff accurately record when forms or other documents related to VA compensation and pension benefits are received. This report addresses VBA's evolving guidance on how to discern and record the date of receipt for correspondence from claimants and assesses the effectiveness of changes to receipt of physical mail at VA regional offices.

VBA Mail Process and Procedures

According to VBA, effective mail management is crucial to the success and control of its workflow.⁶ Many veterans still use mail to communicate with VA. According to a VBA Office of Business Process Integration program analyst, for March and April 2020, VBA received approximately 476,000 packets of mail.⁷ Physical mail is received by the regional offices and comes from various sources, including

- USPS,
- FedEx,
- United Parcel Service (UPS),

⁶ VA Manual 21-1, part 3, sub. 2, chap. 1, sec. a, "Process Overview," September 30, 2010.

⁷ A packet or package pertains to a single veteran and may contain one or more documents.

- local regional office public contact unit (submitted in person),⁸
- veterans service organizations,⁹ or
- VA satellite offices and medical facilities.

Mail received by the regional office from these sources is sent to a centralized scanning facility in Janesville, Wisconsin. Support Services Divisions (SSDs) in regional offices are responsible for establishing local procedures for the movement of all mail, including delivering incoming mail and picking up outgoing mail. The individual regional office is responsible for date-stamping the mail, attaching the mail with its original envelopes, and packaging mail to send to the scanning facility.

The scanning facility is part of VBA's centralized mail processing that consolidates the receipt of VBA claims-related mail and standardizes mail operations across VBA's regional offices. The intent of centralizing VBA claims-related mail was to ultimately eliminate paper handling by VBA personnel at regional offices by scanning mail to include envelopes, while streamlining the process. Centralization was developed to expeditiously upload claims, evidence, and other mail to a veteran's eFolder in the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS), a web-based electronic program used to process claims. The eFolder serves as an information hub by housing all documents associated with a veteran's claim in one centralized location.¹⁰

Figure 1 illustrates the process for loading documents from claimants and their representatives into VBMS. As reflected under the intake heading, documents are submitted to the scanning facility through different methods. Some documents are directly uploaded to VBMS, and other documents are faxed directly to a VBA scanning vendor.

⁸ The public contact unit is primarily responsible for meeting with claimants who visit a regional office to obtain information about VA benefits, request assistance in filing claims, and receive information hand-delivered to an office.

⁹ Veterans service organizations are representatives that assist claimants in the preparation, presentation, and prosecution of claims for veterans' benefits.

¹⁰ The VBMS eFolder is the electronic equivalent of a VBA paper claims folder.

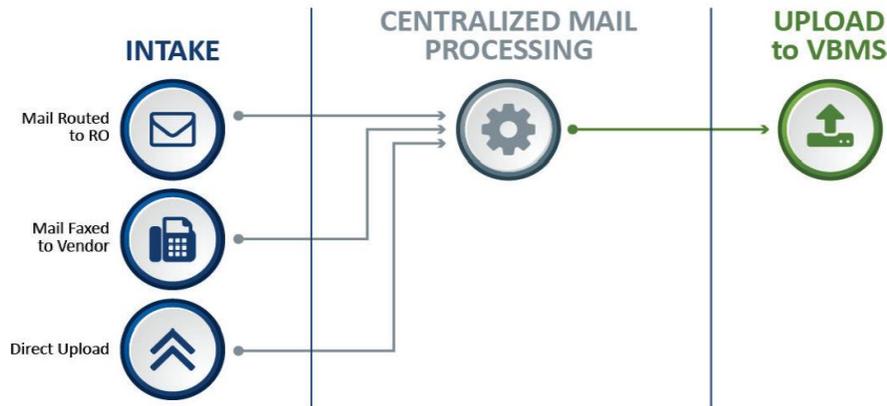


Figure 1. VBA mail process.

Source: 2021 VA Budget Submission, Volume III, February 2020.

Note: RO stands for regional office.

Prior to being sent to the scanning facility, each document must be stamped with the date of receipt.¹¹ Mail addressed to veterans service organizations colocated with VA offices is forwarded directly to the organizations unopened. As a result, the date of receipt for any correspondence included in a package is only marked after a veterans service organization representative submits any claimant-related mail to VA.¹² This correspondence is then forwarded to the scanning facility for processing.

VBA's Process for Compensation and Pension Benefit Claims

VBA's compensation program provides tax-free monthly benefits to veterans with disabilities caused by diseases or injuries incurred or aggravated during active military service (service-connected disabilities).¹³ The VBA pension program provides monthly payments to wartime veterans who meet certain age or disability requirements and who have income and net worth within specified limits.¹⁴ Once a claim for benefits under either program is submitted, figure 2 shows how it is electronically transferred to VBMS and the general claims-processing lifecycle.

¹¹ VA Manual 21-1, part 3, sub. 2, chap. 1, sec. c, "Initial Screening Policies," April 18, 2019.

¹² VA Manual 23-1, part 1, chap. 1, "Mail Management," March 7, 1994.

¹³ 38 C.F.R. § 3.1 (1961).

¹⁴ A beneficiary's yearly family income and net worth must meet certain limits set by Congress. The net worth includes all personal property owned (except house, car, and most home furnishings), minus any debt owed. For pension rates, see <https://www.va.gov/pension/veterans-pension-rates/>.



Figure 2. VBA claims-processing lifecycle.

Source: VBMS User Guide, April 2020.

1. The claims establishment step includes activities related to creating and monitoring claims for benefits.
2. The development step involves efforts required to plan, identify, request, and receive all the documents needed to evaluate and decide claims.
3. The rating step covers evaluating claims and providing decisions.
4. The award step completes the authorization of decisions and ensures granted benefits are provided to claimants.
5. The appeals process consists of resolving notices of disagreement from claimants who were dissatisfied with actions and want to contest completed decisions.

Date of Receipt Guidance

As previously mentioned, VBA policy states that the assignment of an effective date is an integral part of the decision-making process as it establishes the date from which entitlement to and payment of benefits begin.¹⁵ Generally, the effective date is assigned based on the date of receipt of the claim or the date entitlement arose, whichever is later.¹⁶ Prior to the COVID-19 national state of emergency, the date of receipt for mail was the date it was stamped by a VA facility. If the mail was faxed or mailed directly to the scanning vendor, the date of receipt was the date applied to the scanned image by the vendor.

On April 6, 2020, VBA guidance called for dramatic alterations to operations in response to the COVID-19 state of emergency. The guidance was provided via email to VBA staff who subscribed to receive notifications for a specific VBA mailing list. The new guidance changed the date of receipt for claims from the date it was received at a VA facility to the date of postmark. This guidance was effective retroactively to March 1, 2020, and will expire 60 calendar days following the date the President ends the national state of emergency. In

¹⁵ VA Manual 21-1, part 3, sub. 4, chap. 5, sec. c, “Effective Dates,” June 6, 2019.

¹⁶ “Date entitlement arose” refers to the date on which the facts in the case demonstrate that the entitling criteria are first met. Before applying the general rule, all information gathered during evidence review must be considered to determine whether a more specific effective date rule applies. Although the effective date is often the date of the receipt of the claim, it is determined by a variety of factors, including date entitlement arose, date of veteran’s discharge from military service, and legislative changes affecting entitlement to benefits.

addition, the new guidance noted that in the event there was no postmark or date stamp by the mail carrier, VA would consider any correspondence with a VA date stamp during the designated period as received no later than February 29, 2020.¹⁷ Table 1 summarizes the date of receipt guidance for physical mail both prior to and during the national state of emergency.

Table 1. Date of Receipt Guidance for Physical Mail

Location physical mail was received	Date of receipt to be applied for physical mail received prior to March 1, 2020	Date of receipt for mail received March 1, 2020, through 60 calendar days following end of national state of emergency
VA facility	Date when mail was stamped as received by VA facility	Date of postmark affixed by mail carrier OR if the postmark is unavailable, a date of no later than February 29, 2020

Source: VA OIG analysis of VBA date of receipt policies.

Generally, when VA benefits are initially awarded, they are paid from the first day of the month following the effective date. For example, if VA were to grant benefits as of April 21, 2020 (the date of receipt for the veteran’s claim), then the effective date for payment would be May 1, 2020, the first day of the following month. Accordingly, the effective date determination can have a direct impact on when benefit payments begin.

¹⁷ VBA Policy Letter 20-02, “Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Claims and Appeals Processing Guidance,” April 6, 2020.

Results and Recommendations

Finding 1: VBA Staff Did Not Implement New Guidance on Recording the Date of Receipt for Benefits-Related Correspondence

The review team determined, based on a statistical sample, that VBA staff did not implement the governing guidance issued for the COVID-19 national state of emergency related to changing how dates of receipt should be documented for benefits-related correspondence. The team reviewed a sample of 120 claims established in VBMS from April 7 through April 20, 2020, the OIG review period of 10 business days, to assess whether staff applied the correct date of receipt for the claims in the system. The team estimated 98 percent of approximately 3,200 established claims during the review period did not have the date of receipt guidance properly applied by VBA staff. As the date of receipt is often used as the date of entitlement for granted award payments, claimants could be underpaid if staff assign an incorrect effective date based on the wrong date of receipt documented in VBMS.

The review team found VBA staff were not always aware of all aspects of the new guidance. The policy letter was provided to VBA regional offices, and the deputy under secretary for field operations discussed the new policy with VBA management personnel. However, there was no training mandated to ensure VBA staff understood and were aware of the policy change and some staff were unsure if they even received the policy change information. The deputy under secretary for field operations stated it was the responsibility of local leaders to ensure employees were notified of the policy.

The April 2020 policy letter noted the guidance was applicable starting March 1, 2020. However, the review team found that VBA had no plans to ensure claims received and completed on or after March 1, 2020, before issuance of the revised guidance in April 2020 were accurately processed.

The review team also found that the application of the date of receipt guidance for when the postmark is unavailable could be applied in a manner not originally intended. For example, if the national state of emergency were to remain in effect for the remainder of 2020, a claim received in December 2020 without a postmark could have February 29, 2020, or earlier as the date of receipt. In this scenario, a claimant would potentially receive payments for 10 months or longer than would have been allowed by the claim's actual submission date.

What the OIG Did

To determine whether VBA staff implemented date of receipt guidance for correspondence received during the COVID-19 national state of emergency, the review team identified a population of approximately 3,200 claims established during the 10-business-day review period. The claims resulted from physical mail addressed to and received by VA facilities. The team

then reviewed a statistical sample of 120 claims to examine whether the proper guidance on documenting the date of receipt was applied. The team also interviewed staff and managers at VA's central office in Washington, DC, and two regional offices: Detroit, Michigan, and Los Angeles, California. Appendixes A and B provide additional details on the review team's actions and methodology.

This report addresses the following issues:

- VBA staff failed to follow new guidance on the date of receipt in these ways:
 - Using the postmark date of mail as the date of receipt
 - Using a date of receipt of February 29, 2020, when the postmark date was unavailable
 - documenting reasons for estimates of date of receipt on mail with partially legible postmarks
- Claimants may receive improper payments.
- VBA managers did not ensure staff were aware of the new guidance.
- No plans existed to ensure all claims affected from March 1 to April 6, 2020, would be reviewed for compliance with the new guidance.
- New guidance on missing postmarks could result in a date of receipt being assigned earlier than intended.

VBA Staff Failed to Follow New Date of Receipt Guidance

The review team estimated that VBA staff did not apply new date of receipt guidance for nearly 3,200 claims established in VBMS during the review period. VBA's quality review staff concurred with the team's sample findings. Table 2 summarizes the estimated number of claims established by finding description.

Table 2. Estimated Number of Claims Established in VBMS without the New Date of Receipt Guidance Applied (from April 7 through April 20, 2020)

Finding description	Number of claims established in VBMS
Postmark date not used as date of receipt	2,700
Incorrect date of receipt used when postmark was not available	410
Estimated date of receipt was not documented when postmark was partially legible	70
Total	3,200

Source: VA OIG analysis and projections of statistically sampled VBA claims established during review period.

Note: Numbers were rounded and do not sum.

Postmark Date Not Used as Date of Receipt

Based on its sample results, the review team estimated approximately 2,700 claims established during the review period did not use the postmark date as required by the new policy letter. This could have an impact on claimants’ benefits if entitlements were based on the incorrect date of receipt. For example, a veteran’s claim for compensation was postmarked March 31, 2020, and date-stamped by a VA facility on April 6, 2020. The claims processor documented the date of receipt as April 6, 2020, rather than the postmark date of March 31, 2020, as dictated by the new guidance. As benefit payments are typically effective the first of the following month, if benefits were to be granted effective the inaccurately documented date of receipt, the veteran would be underpaid by a month’s worth of benefits.

The new policy also required that staff enter a VBMS note stating “COVID-19-postmark accepted” on all affected cases. The policy noted this was for informational purposes for claims processors. VBA’s deputy executive director of policy and procedures reported the VBMS note was also used to track the number of claims affected by the national state of emergency. The review team found none of the cases reviewed included this required VBMS note.

Incorrect Date of Receipt Applied When Postmark Unavailable

In the event there was no postmark for mail, VBA’s new guidance instructed staff to consider the date of receipt as received no later than February 29, 2020. The review team estimated approximately 410 claims established during the review period did not use February 29, 2020, as the date of receipt when the postmark was unavailable. For example, a veteran’s claim for

compensation was received without a USPS postmark date and was date-stamped by a VA facility on April 6, 2020. The claims processor documented the date of receipt as April 6, 2020, rather than February 29, 2020, based on the absence of a postmark date. A decision made on May 29, 2020, granted benefits effective April 6, 2020, rather than February 29, 2020. As a result, the veteran was underpaid approximately \$740 over a two-month period.

Failure to Annotate Reason for Date Used When Postmark Was Partially Legible

The policy letter providing the new guidance for determining the date of receipt for claims did not include instructions noting what to do when the postmark date was only partially legible. For example, the image in figure 3 shows a postmark for which the month and year of APR 2020 can be read, but the day was unclear.

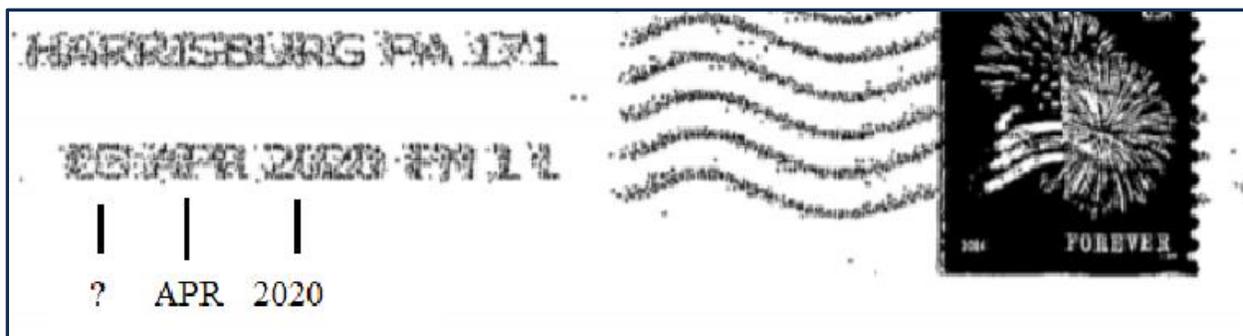


Figure 3: Copy of envelope with illegible postmark annotated.

Source: VBMS eFolder.

The review team met with VBA compensation policy staff, who acknowledged this scenario was not covered by the new guidance. Compensation Service then provided additional guidance on May 14, 2020, that included procedures for dealing with illegible postmarks. The guidance stated that in cases where the postmark was partially legible, staff were to provide the best estimate for the date of receipt and identify it as an estimate on the document.¹⁸ The team estimated approximately 70 claims established during the review period contained partially legible postmarks that did not note the date of receipt applied for them was an estimate. In addition, for each case in which the postmark was partially legible, VBA staff applied the date the document was date-stamped at the scanning facility, which was the procedure prior to the new guidance. Therefore, it was unlikely staff were aware of the new guidance. Noncompliance with the new

¹⁸ On May 14, 2020, Compensation Service updated its frequently asked questions document on its Novel Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Operational Information Page, clarifying the use of the postmark date of mail as the date of claim and providing guidance on the date of claim for mail with illegible or partially legible postmarks.

guidance does not provide the documented support for potential dates of entitlement to benefits.¹⁹

Claimants May Receive Improper Payments

As the date of receipt may be used as the date of entitlement for benefits, inaccurate documentation of the date of receipt can lead to improper payments.²⁰ This is most likely to occur when the month for the date of receipt is improperly documented, as awarded payments are usually effective the first of the month following the receipt date. The review team estimated 700 claims were established with the incorrect month of receipt during the review period. VBA claims processors still have the opportunity to apply a correct date of entitlement based on what the date of receipt should be. They can make this correction during the rating and award steps of the claims-processing lifecycle. However, if these corrections were not made, and if these claims resulted in awarded benefits effective the date of receipt for the improperly documented dates, claimants could be underpaid.

VBA Managers Did Not Ensure Staff Were Aware of the New Guidance

VBA staff did not follow date of receipt guidance because VBA managers did not ensure regional office staff were aware of and understood all aspects of the policy. On April 6, 2020, VBA issued the new processing guidance for documenting the date of receipt for claims affected by the COVID-19 state of emergency. VBA had a communication plan for the new policy, which noted they had taken actions such as providing the policy letter to VBA regional offices, holding a Compensation Service quality call with claims processors and managers, and the deputy under secretary for field operations discussing the policy with VBA managers.

Beginning May 7, 2020, the review team interviewed claims-processing staff at the Detroit, Michigan, and Los Angeles, California, VA regional offices. The staff members interviewed were not fully aware of the new guidance. Some staff were unaware of the requirement to use the postmark as the date of receipt, while others did not know what to do when a postmark was unavailable or illegible. Of 12 staff interviewed at the Detroit and Los Angeles offices, 10 lacked awareness of all aspects of the new guidance. Most of those staff also acknowledged they had not received training or attended a team meeting to discuss the changes. Some were not sure if they had even received the policy letter with the new guidance.

Managers and their staff also noted that using something other than the date stamp is a major change for claims processors and they need time to get used to the new process. The Los Angeles veterans service center manager stated her office provided the April 6, 2020, VBA policy letter

¹⁹ VA Manual 21-1, part 3, sub. 4, chap. 5, sec. c, "Effective Dates," June 6, 2019.

²⁰ Although the date of entitlement is often the date of the receipt of the claim, it is determined by a variety of factors such as legislative changes, date of discharge from military service, and when entitlement arose.

via email to all employees and managers the same day. Further, she said that the office sent out an email reminder on May 7, 2020, and would continue to send reminders on a monthly basis to claims processors. The Detroit veterans service center manager needed OIG staff to clarify the change in procedures for noting the date of receipt. He also stated that he received the policy letter but was under the impression that the guidance did not change the procedures for recording the date of receipt. He was also unsure whether his quality review team did an impromptu training to cover the policy letter, but nevertheless stated that nothing had changed with processing the date of receipt as their physical mail process had not changed.

On May 4 and May 13, 2020, the review team spoke to VBA's director of policy and procedures, who acknowledged the new guidance did not cover every scenario that could influence the date of receipt determination. Subsequently, on May 14, 2020, the Compensation Service novel coronavirus (COVID-19) operational web page was updated to provide the clarification. The clarification was in the form of frequently asked questions (FAQs) and explained how claims processors should apply the postmark date of mail for date of claim purposes and how to deal with illegible postmarks.

On May 15 and 18, 2020, the review team interviewed staff and managers at the Detroit and Los Angeles VA regional offices after the FAQs were updated on May 14, 2020. The majority of staff interviewed at both offices stated they had not received the FAQs. Notification of the FAQs was provided via email to VBA staff who subscribed to receive such notifications from a VBA mailing list, rather than mandated training. The Detroit veterans service center manager was not aware of the FAQs until the review team emailed him a copy. He stated that he would send the FAQs to managers, who would disseminate the guidance to the employees. Detroit quality team members were surprised that the new guidance did not receive more attention and felt that mandated training was required nationally as well as some clarification on several aspects of the policy.

The Los Angeles veterans service center manager confirmed receipt of the FAQs on May 15, 2020, but had not yet read them, and therefore had not provided the guidance to her employees. The veterans service center manager noted she would meet with the quality team and training coordinator to go over the FAQs, and then the quality team would send out an email explaining it.

VBA's director of policy and procedures noted that Compensation Service had not issued any mandatory training on the new guidance because it had been working very quickly to assist affected veterans. The deputy under secretary for field operations stated training was provided by covering the new guidance in weekly calls with the expectation that all regional office managers listening to the calls would enforce the new guidance. He further clarified that it is the responsibility of local leaders to ensure employees are notified and aware of new guidance. He stated that staff may not be aware of the policy change due to reasons such as possibly being

affected themselves by the national state of emergency. The deputy conceded that training for staff to reinforce the guidance may be needed to ensure staff understand the policy.

The OIG's first recommendation addresses the need for the under secretary for benefits to determine what additional actions are needed to make certain that staff understand how to accurately apply the most current date of receipt for claims received during the national state of emergency and implement those actions.

No Plans to Ensure All Claims Affected from March 1 to April 6 Are Reviewed for Compliance with the New Guidance

The review team found that VBA had no plans to ensure all claims affected by the guidance, but completed prior to the guidance being issued, were accurately processed. The new guidance for date of receipt processing was issued on April 6, 2020, but had an impact on claims received on or after March 1, 2020. The review team inquired if VBA had plans to ensure claims established and completed before the guidance was issued were processed accurately. Managers at the Office of Field Operations and Compensation Service were not aware of any plans to review claims received and completed in that period to ensure accuracy. Consequently, claims received and completed from March 1 to April 6, 2020, are at risk of having an incorrect date of receipt applied, which could lead to improper payments.

The OIG's second recommendation addresses the need for the under secretary for benefits to conduct a review to ensure claims received and completed on or after March 1, 2020, had the correct date of entitlement applied.

New Missing Postmark Guidance Could Result in a Date of Receipt Being Assigned Earlier than Intended

The review team interviewed the deputy executive director of policy and procedures to determine why the guidance directed staff to use a date of "no later than February 29, 2020," when a postmark was unavailable. She stated the intent was not for staff to use a date earlier than February 29, 2020, and that the guidance should be revisited. Per the deputy director of the Appeals Management Office, based on the "no later than" wording of the guidance, staff could potentially assign claims with missing postmarks an effective date earlier than February 29, 2020.

The deputy executive director of policy and procedures also noted that when the guidance was established, it was unknown how long the national state of emergency would be in effect. If the national state of emergency is extended to the end of the year, a claim received without a postmark in December 2020 could still be assigned a date of receipt of February 29, 2020. In this scenario, a claimant could receive payments for the 10 months before the claim was actually

submitted. For this reason, the deputy executive director of policy and procedures noted it would be worth reviewing the use of the date of February 29, 2020, as well.

The OIG's third recommendation addresses the need for the under secretary for benefits to reevaluate guidance for the date of receipt recorded for claims without a postmark received during the national state of emergency.

Finding 1 Conclusion

During the review period of April 7 through April 20, 2020, VBA staff did not follow new guidance on documenting the date of receipt, potentially affecting nearly 3,200 claims. When VBA staff do not document the appropriate date of receipt, claimants may receive improper payments. If VBA does not take steps to ensure staff are aware of and adhering to the guidance, additional claimants could be affected.

The lack of compliance with guidance may have been caused by several factors. The OIG concedes it was likely a chaotic and stressful time for VBA personnel. Although VBA issued formal guidance after the declaration of the state of emergency, the guidance initially did not adequately cover scenarios such as what to do when a postmark was unavailable or illegible. Clarification in the form of an FAQ was not provided for an additional 38 days. Formal training was not mandated for VBA staff to ensure they were made aware of and were following the new guidance. The OIG made three recommendations for corrective action.

Recommendations 1–3

The OIG made the following recommendations to the under secretary for benefits:

1. Determine what additional actions are needed to make certain that staff understand how to accurately apply the most current guidance to the date of receipt recorded for claims received during the national state of emergency and implement those actions.
2. Conduct a review to ensure claims received and completed from March 1, 2020, had the correct date of entitlement applied.
3. Reevaluate guidance for the date of receipt recorded for claims without a postmark received during the national state of emergency.

Management Comments

The under secretary for benefits concurred with recommendations 1 through 3 and provided acceptable action plans. The full text of VBA's comments can be found in appendix D. The under secretary noted VBA is not able to validate or replicate OIG's statistical results noted in appendix B of the OIG draft report. VBA is continuing its review of the methodology and results and will continue to engage OIG statisticians in resolving these issues.

To address recommendation 1, the under secretary for benefits stated VBA communicated the current guidance through several different channels. Further, VBA will recommunicate current procedures related to date of receipt to all regional office employees and ensure regional offices conduct meetings with their employees to discuss the policy. The target completion date is September 30, 2020.

To address recommendation 2, VBA is analyzing data and developing a plan to define the scope of claims requiring review. The target completion date is February 26, 2021.

To address recommendation 3, guidance related to COVID-19 is being updated to clarify the date of receipt for affected claims without a postmark. VBA anticipates publishing a Federal Register notice with this updated policy. The target completion date is September 30, 2020.

OIG Response

The under secretary's comments and actions are responsive to the recommendations. The OIG will monitor VBA's progress and follow up on implementation of all recommendations until proposed actions are completed.

Regarding VBA's inability to validate or replicate the OIG's statistical results noted in appendix B, as previously discussed with VBA, OIG statisticians noted that the margin of error for an estimate of a count from a complex, clustered sample is expected to be much larger than for a percentage. These sample estimates were calculated using a Taylor series approximation methodology to account for the complexity of the sample design in the OIG's estimates. This is a standard statistical methodology in such a situation.

Finding 2: VBA Staff Were Able to Process Mail Despite the National State of Emergency

The review team determined VBA staff processed mail received at VA facilities during the COVID-19 national state of emergency. VBA noted that effective March 31, 2020, all VA mail received at and addressed to VBA regional offices would be forwarded by the postal service to the Janesville, Wisconsin, scanning facility.

There were several exceptions for mail forwarding: (1) mail addressed to veterans service organizations colocated with VBA regional offices, and (2) regional offices colocated with VA medical centers, federal buildings, and the National Cemetery Association would not have their USPS mail forwarded.²¹ Per the deputy under secretary for field operations, offices that did not have mail automatically forwarded to the scanning facility were to have staff available to process the incoming mail.

The review team sent a survey to 57 regional office directors and 57 regional office Support Services Division (SSD) chiefs to determine how mail-processing operations were affected by the national state of emergency.²² The team received 94 responses out of a potential 114, obtaining a response rate of about 82 percent.²³ Every regional office had at least one respondent, and the team is grateful to the personnel who took time to complete the survey.

Results indicated the majority of regional offices used various methods to ensure mail operations continued, such as forwarding mail to the scanning facility and having staff periodically available on-site to process mail. However, some regional offices noted they did not have mail forwarded or staff available on-site. Several managers reported they put a temporary hold on mail delivery until staff returned.

In addition, representatives from veterans service organizations colocated at the Detroit, Michigan, and Los Angeles, California, regional offices confirmed mail operations continued at their offices. VBA proactively implemented a process to ensure mail for veterans service organizations that was erroneously received at the scanning facility was returned. The documents for veterans service organizations could either be emailed or physically mailed to them via UPS or FedEx upon request.

²¹ According to a VBA program analyst, 15 regional offices were considered colocated facilities.

²² In addition to VBA's 56 regional offices, the survey was sent to the Appeals Management Office, and this office is therefore included in the sum of 57 regional offices in this report.

²³ There were 15 nonresponses, one vacant position, and four instances where SSD chiefs did not oversee mail at those facilities due to local circumstances such as collocation with a VA medical center.

What the OIG Did

To determine whether VBA continued to process mail received at regional offices during the COVID-19 national state of emergency, the review team surveyed and interviewed regional office directors and SSD chiefs nationwide regarding mail receipt and processing actions. The survey was open from May 7 through May 26, 2020. The survey results were consistent with information received in interviews conducted with regional office directors and SSD chiefs, as well as representatives from veterans service organizations. The team interviewed staff and managers at VA central office in Washington, DC; a VBA program analyst located at the scanning facility in Janesville, Wisconsin; and veterans service organization representatives at the Detroit, Michigan, and Los Angeles, California, VBA regional offices. Appendixes A and C provide additional details on the team's actions and methodology.

Mail Operations Based on Survey Response

The survey asked if the regional offices were automatically forwarding USPS mail to the scanning vendor or had staff consistently on-site to process USPS mail from March 31, 2020, to present—i.e., the date they responded to the survey:

- Fifty regional offices responded that they ensured USPS mail processing continued.
- Seven regional offices responded that they did not process USPS mail or provided conflicting responses.

The team conducted additional interviews to clarify some of the responses. One regional office SSD chief clarified that USPS mail was being automatically forwarded to the scanning facility; however, they were still processing mail for veterans service organizations and mail from FedEx and UPS. The SSD chief further noted the office had an employee coming in at least once a week to process this mail for the regional office.

Managers at another regional office stated USPS was autoforwarding mail with the exception of certified mail, which USPS could not forward, and April 6, 2020, was the first day a staff member started going in to process the mail. The director stated she did not want anyone on mass transit during the pandemic, so there was a period of time when no one was going into the office.

The survey also asked if the regional offices had staff on-site and were processing mail from FedEx and UPS for the time period from March 31, 2020, to the date they responded to the survey:

- Forty-six regional offices responded that they ensured FedEx and UPS mail processing continued.
- Eleven regional offices responded that they did not process FedEx and UPS mail or provided conflicting responses.

Additional interviews were conducted by the review team to clarify some of the responses. One regional office arranged to hold FedEx and UPS mail, while another regional office had staff in the office intermittently to collect packages. Prior to March 31, 2020, the majority of regional offices took steps to ensure that mail processing continued. Some regional offices dealt with this unprecedented state of emergency by taking actions to include holding or forwarding the mail.

Expectation That Mail Operations Would Continue

The deputy under secretary for field operations stated that mail processing is one of the most important things VBA does and it had to continue. He stated that prior to the COVID-19 national state of emergency, if a VA regional office had to close, such as due to a hurricane, that regional office had to work with the local USPS to receive and pick up mail. Prior to this national state of emergency, there was not a plan in place to ensure processing of mail in the event services were disrupted nationally. Therefore, once some VA regional offices closed in mid-March, VBA managers started discussing what to do with mail going forward.

VBA managers were aware that they needed to prevent mail for veterans service organizations and other tenants colocated with VA regional offices from being mistakenly sent to the scanning facility. The deputy under secretary for field operations stated that the expectation was that once the national plan to automatically forward USPS mail to the scanning facility was implemented, some employees would still report to regional offices to process mail from other sources.

Mail Operation Guidance from VA Central Office

VBA's Office of Field Operations reported confirmation from USPS that mail for regional offices not colocated with VA medical centers was autoforwarded to the scanning facility. VBA guidance noted that the scanning facility would only receive forwarded mail from USPS and that regional offices should work with their local UPS and FedEx on mail received at their offices.

A program analyst from the Office of Field Operations stated that there are some VA regional offices that could not forward their mail for specific reasons related to that office, such as being colocated with a National Cemetery Administration office. In those situations, the regional office staff worked with the local USPS to process that mail. The deputy under secretary for field operations stated that every VA regional office had employees on-site to process mail and that it is the responsibility of the VA regional office director to ensure that mail operations continue.

Scanning Facility Adjustments due to National State of Emergency

The review team interviewed an Office of Business Process Integration program analyst physically located at the scanning facility in Janesville, Wisconsin. The program analyst stated that she had observed a higher volume of mail since forwarding began due to the national state of emergency. However, she said there was not a backlog of mail and timeliness of mail processing was not affected. The program analyst stated that the scanning facility established a special

process for handling autoforwarded mail affected by the national state of emergency. Additional screening must be conducted to determine the appropriate recipient. The Office of Field Operations manages the screening process. About 30 designated VA regional office employees around the country screen this mail.

A program analyst with VBA's Office of Field Operations revealed that VBA had procedures in place to ensure mail erroneously received at the scanning facility intended for veterans service organizations would be provided to them. The program analyst stated the designated employees download the documents and either email them to the veterans service organization or mail them via UPS or FedEx.

Colocated Veterans Service Organizations

The review team interviewed representatives from the Disabled American Veterans and the Veterans of Foreign Wars veterans service organizations colocated at the Los Angeles VA regional office. The representatives stated the regional office had a staff member on-site at the office every day to process mail. The service organizations' mail was delivered to their secure offices and they were able to come into the office once or twice a week to process their mail. They were aware that mail addressed to the VA regional office was being automatically forwarded to the scanning vendor, but these representatives did not voice any concerns about receiving their mail from veterans. However, both noted they were not certain if any of their mail had been erroneously forwarded to the scanning vendor.

The review team also interviewed representatives from the American Legion and the Military Order of the Purple Heart veterans service organizations colocated at the Detroit VA regional office. The representatives stated the mailroom remained open at the office and they had keys to their own mailboxes where they could pick up their mail from veterans. The representatives were told their mail would not be forwarded to the scanning facility.

Finding 2 Conclusion

The review team found that VBA mail operations continued during the national state of emergency. VA central office issued guidance to regional offices informing them to forward USPS mail to the scanning vendor. The scanning vendor was able to meet the increased demand and implemented screening to ensure mail was routed appropriately. In addition, a process was put in place to ensure mail for veterans service organizations that was erroneously forwarded to the scanning vendor would be returned to them.

Appendix A: Scope and Methodology

Scope

The review team conducted its review work from May through July 2020. For the date of receipt objective, the team evaluated non-duplicate rating, non-rating, and appeal claims (excluding eligibility determinations and pre-discharge claims) received from a claimant, addressed to VA, initially received by mail at a VA facility from March 1, 2020, and established after April 6, 2020, for claims received during the COVID-19 national state of emergency.²⁴ For the mail processing objective, the team conducted a survey of VA regional office directors and SSD chiefs to gain insight on the mail process at each facility.

Methodology

To accomplish the review objectives, the review team identified and reviewed applicable laws, regulations, policies, procedures, and guidelines related to mail operations and date of receipt. The team interviewed and obtained testimonial information related to work processes and procedures associated with mail and date of receipt including managers and staff with VA central office, and two VA regional offices in May 2020—Detroit, Michigan, and Los Angeles, California.

The review team conducted an electronic survey of the 57 regional office directors and SSD chiefs from May 7 through May 26, 2020, for a total of 114 potential responses. The survey was designed to collect information on how VA regional offices processed mail during the COVID-19 national state of emergency. The team obtained 94 responses, resulting in about an 82 percent response rate. The review team interviewed regional office directors and SSD chiefs, as necessary, to gain clarification regarding responses to the survey. The review team interviewed managers at the following regional offices: New York, New York; Newark, New Jersey; Oakland, California; and San Diego, California. The team also interviewed representatives from veterans service organizations colocated at the Detroit, Michigan, and Los Angeles, California, regional offices. Appendix C provides the results of the survey.

In coordination with VA OIG statisticians, the team reviewed a statistical random sample of 120 rating, nonrating, and appeals claims established from April 6, 2020, through April 20, 2020, and where physical mail was received at a VA facility. The claims were established at eight regional offices, with two offices being randomly selected from each of the four VBA districts.²⁵

²⁴ Eligibility determinations are decisions relating to benefits under other VA programs; programs of other federal and state agencies; and determinations relating to elections, waivers, guardianship issues, and other issues affecting payments. Pre-discharge claims are accepted from service members who are still on active duty.

²⁵ District offices are responsible for the effective management of VBA regional offices in an assigned geographical area.

The team reviewed 15 cases from each of the eight offices. The eight regional offices randomly selected were Chicago, Illinois; Detroit, Michigan; Fort Harrison, Montana; Los Angeles, California; Montgomery, Alabama; Muskogee, Oklahoma; Portland, Oregon; and San Juan, Puerto Rico. The team then determined whether VBA staff accurately assigned the correct dates of claim. The team used VBA's electronic systems, including VBMS, to review the sampled veterans' electronic claims folders and relevant documentation. The team discussed the findings with VBA officials and included the VBA comments where appropriate. Appendix B provides more details on the statistical sampling methodology.

Fraud Assessment

The review team assessed the risk that fraud, violations of legal and regulatory requirements, and abuse could occur during this review. The review team exercised due diligence in staying alert to any fraud indicators by

- soliciting the OIG's Office of Investigations for indicators,
- reviewing OIG hotline complaints and concerns for indicators, and
- conducting fraud assessments to identify fraud risks significant to the objective.

The OIG did not identify any instances of fraud or potential fraud during this review.

Data Reliability

The review team used computer-processed data from VBA's Tableau server. To test for reliability, the team determined whether any data were missing from key fields or were outside the time frame requested. The team also assessed whether the data contained obvious duplication of records, alphabetic or numeric characters in incorrect fields, or illogical relationships among data elements. Furthermore, the team compared data provided in the Tableau report, such as veterans' file numbers, dates of claims established, and end product codes against information contained in the 120 VBMS electronic claims folders reviewed.

Testing of the data disclosed that they were sufficiently reliable for the review objective. Comparison of the data with information contained in the veterans' electronic claims folders reviewed did not disclose any problems with data reliability.

Government Standards

The OIG performed this work in accordance with the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency's *Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation*. for competency, independence, professional judgment, timeliness, records management, quality, and fraud.

Appendix B: Statistical Sampling Methodology

Approach

To accomplish the objective for determining whether VBA staff implemented the date of receipt guidance, the review team assessed a statistical sample of nonduplicate rating, nonrating, and appeals claims (excluding eligibility determinations and pre-discharge claims) received from a claimant, addressed to VA, initially received by mail at a VA facility, and established after April 6, 2020, for claims received during the COVID-19 national state of emergency. The team used statistical sampling to quantify the extent of claims where VA employees did not implement the new date of receipt guidance.

Population

The review population included 3,468 veterans' records for rating, nonrating, and appeal claims (excluding eligibility determinations and pre-discharge claims) established from April 7 through April 20, 2020 (review period), at the eight regional offices randomly selected from the four VBA districts. See appendix A for further explanation on methodology. The team reviewed random samples from the review population, and excluded 785 records because they were found to be

- duplicates,
- not addressed to VA,
- not initially received by mail at a VA facility, or
- established after April 6, 2020, but received prior to the national state of emergency.

For the purposes of the review, the team estimated the population for the nation to be 3,248 claims established.

Sampling Design

The review team selected a statistical sample of 120 claims from the population of records within the team's scope. A multistage sampling design was used, with the population stratified by district. Two stations were selected within each district for a total of eight stations, as seen in table B.1. Fifteen in-scope records were reviewed at each station.

Table B.1. Strata

District	Regional offices
Continental	Fort Harrison, MT; Muskogee, OK
Northeast	Chicago, IL; Detroit, MI
Pacific	Los Angeles, CA; Portland, OR
Southeast	Montgomery, AL; San Juan, PR

Source: VA OIG statistician's stratified population. Data were obtained from VBA's Tableau.

Weights

The estimates in this report were calculated using weighted sample data. Samples were weighted to represent the population from which they were drawn. The team used the weights to compute estimates. For example, the team calculated the error rate point estimates by summing the sampling weights for all sample records that contained the error, then dividing that value by the sum of the weights for all sample records.

Projections and Margins of Error

The point estimate (e.g., estimated error) is an estimate of the population parameter obtained by sampling. The margin of error and confidence interval associated with each point estimate is a measure of the precision of the point estimate that accounts for the sampling methodology used. If the review team repeated this review with multiple samples, the confidence intervals would differ for each sample but would include the true population value 90 percent of the time.

The OIG statistician employed statistical analysis software to calculate the weighted population estimates and associated sampling errors. This software uses Taylor series approximation methodology to calculate margins of error and confidence intervals that correctly account for the complexity of the sample design.

The sample size was determined after reviewing the expected precision of the projections based on the sample size, potential error rate, and logistical concerns of the sample review. While precision improves with larger samples, the rate of improvement does not significantly change as more records are added to the sample review.

Figure B.1 shows the effect of progressively larger sample sizes on the margin of error.

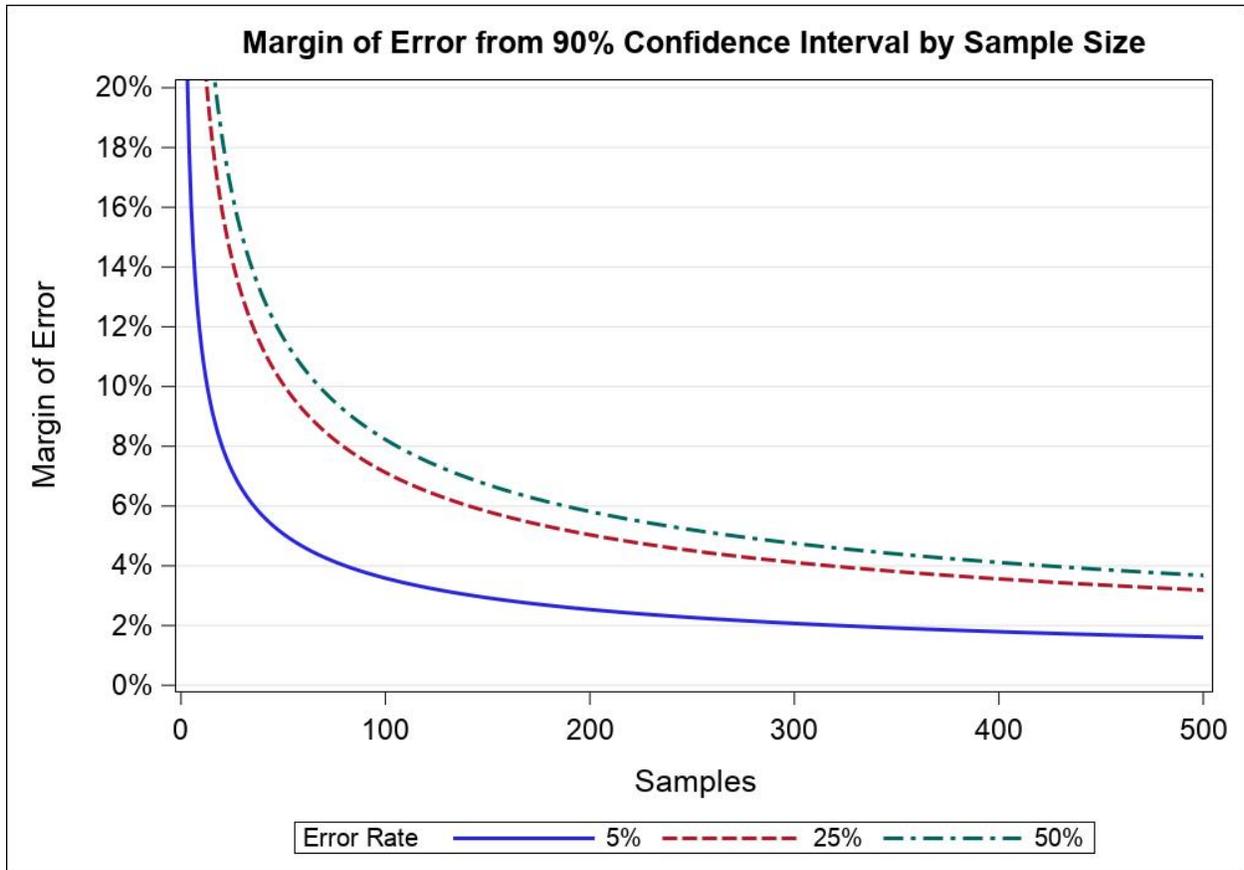


Figure B.1. Effect of sample size on margin of error.

Source: VA OIG statistician’s analysis.

Projections

Table B.2 details the review team’s analysis and projected results.

Table B.2. Statistical Projections Summary for Review of Claims Established during Review Period and Affected by Updated Guidance

Estimate name	Estimate number	Margin of error based on 90 percent confidence interval	90 percent confidence interval lower limit	90 percent confidence interval upper limit	Sample size
In-scope claims established during the review period	3,248	1,563	1,685	4,812	120

Estimate name	Estimate number	Margin of error based on 90 percent confidence interval	90 percent confidence interval lower limit	90 percent confidence interval upper limit	Sample size
Claims established where new date of receipt guidance was not applied	3,198	1,471	1,727	4,669	119
Percentage of claims established where new date of receipt guidance was not applied	98	2	96	100	119
Claims where postmark date not used as date of receipt	2,710	1,309	1,402	4,019	96
Claims where incorrect date of receipt used when postmark was not available	414	167	248	581	18
Claims where estimated date of receipt was not documented when postmark was partially legible	73	51	23	124	5
Claims established with the incorrect month as the date of receipt	697	371	326	1,068	27

Source: VA OIG statistician's projection of estimated population, cases with errors, and error rate.

Note: Projections and confidence intervals do not total precisely due to rounding.

Appendix C: Results of Survey of Mail Operations during the COVID-19 National State of Emergency

Question 1

From March 31, 2020, to the present, was USPS automatically forwarding physical mail addressed to the VA regional office(s) under your jurisdiction to the Janesville, WI, mail scanning vendor?

Table C.1. Responses to Survey Question 1

VA regional office	Director response to question	SSD response to question
Albuquerque, NM	Yes	Other*
Anchorage, AK	No	Other*
Appeals Management Office, DC	No response	No
Atlanta, GA	No	No
Baltimore, MD	No response	Yes
Boise, ID	No	No
Boston, MA	No response	Yes
Buffalo, NY	Yes	No
Chicago, IL	Yes	No
Cleveland, OH	Yes	No
Columbia, SC	No	No
Denver, CO	No	No
Des Moines, IA	Yes	Yes
Detroit, MI	Yes	Yes
Fargo, ND	No	No
Fort Harrison, MT	No	Other*
Hartford, CT	Yes	Yes
Honolulu, HI	Yes	Other*
Houston, TX	No	No
Huntington, WV	Yes	Yes
Indianapolis, IN	Yes	Yes
Jackson, MS	No	No
Lincoln, NE	No	No

VA regional office	Director response to question	SSD response to question
Little Rock, AR	Yes	Yes
Los Angeles, CA	Yes	Yes
Louisville, KY	No response	No
Manchester, NH	No response	No
Manila, Philippines	No	No
Milwaukee, WI	No response	No
Montgomery, AL	No	No
Muskogee, OK	Yes	No response
Nashville, TN	No	Yes
New Orleans, LA	Yes	No
New York, NY	No	Yes
Newark, NJ	Yes	Yes
Oakland, CA	No	No
Philadelphia, PA	Yes	No response
Phoenix, AZ	Yes	Yes
Pittsburgh, PA	No	Yes
Portland, OR	Yes	Yes
Providence, RI	Yes	Yes
Reno, NV	Yes	Yes
Roanoke, VA	No	No
Salt Lake City, UT	Yes	Yes
San Diego, CA	No	No
San Juan, PR	No response	No
Seattle, WA	Yes	Yes
Sioux Falls, SD	No	No
St. Louis, MO	Yes	Yes
St. Paul, MN	No response	Yes
St. Petersburg, FL	No response	No
Togus, ME	No response	No
Waco, TX	No response	No
White River Junction, VT	No response	No
Wichita, KS	Yes	Other*

VA regional office	Director response to question	SSD response to question
Wilmington, DE	Yes	No response
Winston-Salem, NC	No	Yes

Source: OIG review team survey of VA regional office directors and SSD chiefs.

*Vacant position or SSD chief does not oversee mail at that facility due to local circumstances such as colocation with a VA medical center

Question 2

From March 31, 2020, to the present, were the VA regional office(s) under your jurisdiction receiving physical mail from FedEx and/or UPS addressed to the VA regional office?

Table C.2. Responses to Survey Question 2

VA regional office	Director response to question	SSD response to question
Albuquerque, NM	Yes	Other*
Anchorage, AK	Yes	Other*
Appeals Management Office, DC	No response	Yes
Atlanta, GA	Yes	Yes
Baltimore, MD	No response	Yes
Boise, ID	Yes	Yes
Boston, MA	No response	Yes
Buffalo, NY	Yes	Yes
Chicago, IL	Yes	Yes
Cleveland, OH	Yes	Yes
Columbia, SC	Yes	Yes
Denver, CO	Yes	Yes
Des Moines, IA	Yes	Yes
Detroit, MI	Yes	Yes
Fargo, ND	Yes	Yes
Fort Harrison, MT	Yes	Other*
Hartford, CT	Yes	Yes
Honolulu, HI	Yes	Other*
Houston, TX	Yes	Yes
Huntington, WV	Yes	Yes

VA regional office	Director response to question	SSD response to question
Indianapolis, IN	Yes	Yes
Jackson, MS	Yes	Yes
Lincoln, NE	Yes	Yes
Little Rock, AR	Yes	Yes
Los Angeles, CA	Yes	Yes
Louisville, KY	No response	Yes
Manchester, NH	No response	Yes
Manila, Philippines	No	Yes
Milwaukee, WI	No response	Yes
Montgomery, AL	Yes	Yes
Muskogee, OK	Yes	No response
Nashville, TN	Yes	Yes
New Orleans, LA	Yes	Yes
New York, NY	No	No
Newark, NJ	Yes	No
Oakland, CA	Yes	Yes
Philadelphia, PA	Yes	No response
Phoenix, AZ	Yes	Yes
Pittsburgh, PA	No	Yes
Portland, OR	Yes	Yes
Providence, RI	Yes	Yes
Reno, NV	Yes	Yes
Roanoke, VA	Yes	Yes
Salt Lake City, UT	Yes	Yes
San Diego, CA	Yes	Yes
San Juan, PR	No response	Yes
Seattle, WA	Yes	Yes
Sioux Falls, SD	Yes	Yes
St. Louis, MO	Yes	Yes
St. Paul, MN	No response	Yes
St. Petersburg, FL	No response	Yes
Togus, ME	No response	Yes
Waco, TX	No response	Yes

VA regional office	Director response to question	SSD response to question
White River Junction, VT	No response	Yes
Wichita, KS	Yes	Other*
Wilmington, DE	Yes	No response
Winston-Salem, NC	Yes	Yes

Source: OIG review team survey of VA regional office directors and SSD chiefs.

*Vacant position or SSD chief does not oversee mail at that facility due to local circumstances such as colocation with a VA medical center.

Question 3

From March 31, 2020, to the present, were there staff on-site at the VA regional office(s) under your jurisdiction to perform mail operations?

Table C.3. Responses to Survey Question 3

VA regional office	Director response to question	SSD response to question
Albuquerque, NM	Yes	Other*
Anchorage, AK	Yes	Other*
Appeals Management Office, DC	No response	Yes
Atlanta, GA	Yes	Yes
Baltimore, MD	No response	Yes
Boise, ID	Yes	Yes
Boston, MA	No response	Yes
Buffalo, NY	No	No
Chicago, IL	Yes	No
Cleveland, OH	Yes	Yes
Columbia, SC	Yes	Yes
Denver, CO	Yes	Yes
Des Moines, IA	No	Yes
Detroit, MI	Yes	Yes
Fargo, ND	Yes	Yes
Fort Harrison, MT	Yes	Other*
Hartford, CT	Yes	Yes
Honolulu, HI	Yes	Other*

VA regional office	Director response to question	SSD response to question
Houston, TX	Yes	Yes
Huntington, WV	Yes	No
Indianapolis, IN	Yes	Yes
Jackson, MS	Yes	Yes
Lincoln, NE	Yes	Yes
Little Rock, AR	Yes	Yes
Los Angeles, CA	Yes	Yes
Louisville, KY	No response	Yes
Manchester, NH	No response	No
Manila, Philippines	Yes	Yes
Milwaukee, WI	No response	Yes
Montgomery, AL	Yes	Yes
Muskogee, OK	Yes	No response
Nashville, TN	Yes	Yes
New Orleans, LA	Yes	Yes
New York, NY	No	No
Newark, NJ	No	No
Oakland, CA	Yes	No
Philadelphia, PA	Yes	No response
Phoenix, AZ	Yes	Yes
Pittsburgh, PA	Yes	No
Portland, OR	Yes	Yes
Providence, RI	Yes	Yes
Reno, NV	Yes	Yes
Roanoke, VA	Yes	Yes
Salt Lake City, UT	No	Yes
San Diego, CA	Yes	Yes
San Juan, PR	No response	Yes
Seattle, WA	Yes	Yes
Sioux Falls, SD	Yes	Yes
St. Louis, MO	Yes	Yes
St. Paul, MN	No response	Yes
St. Petersburg, FL	No response	Yes

VA regional office	Director response to question	SSD response to question
Togus, ME	No response	No
Waco, TX	No response	Yes
White River Junction, VT	No response	Yes
Wichita, KS	Yes	Other*
Wilmington, DE	Yes	No response
Winston-Salem, NC	Yes	Yes

Source: OIG review team survey of VA regional office directors and SSD chiefs.

*Vacant position or SSD chief does not oversee mail at that facility due to local circumstances such as colocation with a VA medical center

Question 4

Anytime from March 1 to March 31, 2020, was USPS automatically forwarding physical mail addressed to the VA regional office to Janesville for the VA regional office(s) under your jurisdiction?

Table C.4. Responses to Survey Question 4

VA regional office	Director response to question	SSD response to question
Albuquerque, NM	No	Other*
Anchorage, AK	No	Other*
Appeals Management Office, DC	No response	No
Atlanta, GA	No	No
Baltimore, MD	No response	Yes
Boise, ID	No	No
Boston, MA	No response	Yes
Buffalo, NY	Yes	No
Chicago, IL	No	No
Cleveland, OH	No	No
Columbia, SC	No	Yes
Denver, CO	No	No
Des Moines, IA	No	No
Detroit, MI	Yes	No
Fargo, ND	No	Yes

VA regional office	Director response to question	SSD response to question
Fort Harrison, MT	No	Other*
Hartford, CT	Yes	Yes
Honolulu, HI	Yes	Other*
Houston, TX	No	No
Huntington, WV	No	No
Indianapolis, IN	No	Yes
Jackson, MS	No	No
Lincoln, NE	No	No
Little Rock, AR	No	No
Los Angeles, CA	No	Yes
Louisville, KY	No response	Yes
Manchester, NH	No response	No
Manila, Philippines	No	No
Milwaukee, WI	No response	No
Montgomery, AL	No	No
Muskogee, OK	No	No response
Nashville, TN	No	No
New Orleans, LA	No	No
New York, NY	No	Yes
Newark, NJ	No	Yes
Oakland, CA	No	No
Philadelphia, PA	No	No response
Phoenix, AZ	Yes	No
Pittsburgh, PA	No	No
Portland, OR	No	No
Providence, RI	Yes	Yes
Reno, NV	No	Yes
Roanoke, VA	No	No
Salt Lake City, UT	No	No
San Diego, CA	No	No
San Juan, PR	No response	No
Seattle, WA	No	No
Sioux Falls, SD	No	Yes

VA regional office	Director response to question	SSD response to question
St. Louis, MO	No	No
St. Paul, MN	No response	Yes
St. Petersburg, FL	No response	Yes
Togus, ME	No response	Yes
Waco, TX	No response	No
White River Junction, VT	No response	No
Wichita, KS	No	Other*
Wilmington, DE	No	No response
Winston-Salem, NC	No	Yes

Source: OIG review team survey of VA regional office directors and SSD chiefs.

*Vacant position or SSD chief does not oversee mail at that facility due to local circumstances such as colocation with a VA medical center.

Question 5

Anytime from March 1 to March 31, 2020, were there staff on-site at the VA regional office(s) under your jurisdiction to perform mail operations?

Table C.5. Responses to Survey Question 5

VA regional office	Director response to question	SSD response to question
Albuquerque, NM	Yes	Other*
Anchorage, AK	Yes	Other*
Appeals Management Office, DC	No response	Yes
Atlanta, GA	Yes	Yes
Baltimore, MD	No response	Yes
Boise, ID	Yes	Yes
Boston, MA	No response	Yes
Buffalo, NY	No	No
Chicago, IL	Yes	Yes
Cleveland, OH	Yes	Yes
Columbia, SC	Yes	Yes
Denver, CO	Yes	Yes
Des Moines, IA	Yes	Yes
Detroit, MI	Yes	Yes

VA regional office	Director response to question	SSD response to question
Fargo, ND	Yes	Yes
Fort Harrison, MT	Yes	Other*
Hartford, CT	Yes	Yes
Honolulu, HI	Yes	Other*
Houston, TX	Yes	Yes
Huntington, WV	Yes	Yes
Indianapolis, IN	Yes	Yes
Jackson, MS	Yes	Yes
Lincoln, NE	Yes	Yes
Little Rock, AR	Yes	Yes
Los Angeles, CA	Yes	Yes
Louisville, KY	No response	Yes
Manchester, NH	No response	Yes
Manila, Philippines	Yes	Yes
Milwaukee, WI	No response	Yes
Montgomery, AL	Yes	Yes
Muskogee, OK	Yes	No response
Nashville, TN	Yes	Yes
New Orleans, LA	Yes	No
New York, NY	No	No
Newark, NJ	Yes	No
Oakland, CA	Yes	No
Philadelphia, PA	Yes	No response
Phoenix, AZ	Yes	Yes
Pittsburgh, PA	Yes	Yes
Portland, OR	Yes	Yes
Providence, RI	Yes	Yes
Reno, NV	Yes	Yes
Roanoke, VA	Yes	Yes
Salt Lake City, UT	Yes	Yes
San Diego, CA	Yes	No
San Juan, PR	No response	Yes
Seattle, WA	Yes	Yes

VA regional office	Director response to question	SSD response to question
Sioux Falls, SD	Yes	Yes
St. Louis, MO	Yes	Yes
St. Paul, MN	No response	Yes
St. Petersburg, FL	No response	Yes
Togus, ME	No response	Yes
Waco, TX	No response	Yes
White River Junction, VT	No response	Yes
Wichita, KS	Yes	Other*
Wilmington, DE	Yes	No response
Winston-Salem, NC	Yes	Yes

Source: OIG review team survey of VA regional office directors and SSD chiefs.

**Vacant position or SSD chief does not oversee mail at that facility due to local circumstances such as colocation with a VA medical center.*

Appendix D: Management Comments

Department of Veterans Affairs Memorandum

Date: August 19, 2020

From: Under Secretary for Benefits (20)

Subj: OIG Draft Report – Date of Receipt of Claims and Mail Processing During COVID-19 National State of Emergency [Project No. 2020-02825-SD-0003] – VIEWS 03243152

To: Assistant Inspector General for Audits and Evaluations (52)

1. Attached is VBA's response to the OIG Draft Report: Date of Receipt of Claims and Mail Processing During COVID-19 National State of Emergency.

The OIG removed point of contact information prior to publication

/s/

Paul R. Lawrence, Ph.D.

Attachment

Attachment

Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA)

Comments on OIG Draft Report

Date of Receipt of Claims and Mail Processing During COVID-19 National State of Emergency

VBA provides the following comments:

Appendix B: VBA is not able to validate or replicate OIG's statistical results noted in Appendix B of the OIG draft report. VBA is continuing its review of the methodology and results; VBA will continue to engage OIG statisticians in resolving these issues.

The following comments are submitted in response to the recommendations in the OIG draft report:

Recommendation 1: The Under Secretary for Benefits determine what additional actions are needed to make certain that staff understand how to accurately apply the most current guidance to the date of receipt recorded for claims received during the national state of emergency and implement those actions.

VBA Response: Concur. VBA communicated the current guidance through several different channels. To ensure employee understanding, VBA will recommunicate current procedures related to date of receipt to all Regional Office (RO) employees and ensure ROs conduct meetings with their employees to discuss the policy.

Target Completion Date: September 30, 2020.

Recommendation 2: The Under Secretary for Benefits conduct a review to ensure claims received and completed from March 1, 2020 had the correct date of entitlement applied.

VBA Response: Concur. VBA is analyzing data and developing a plan to define the scope of claims requiring review.

Target Completion Date: February 26, 2021.

Recommendation 3: The Under Secretary for Benefits reevaluate guidance for the date of receipt recorded for claims without a postmark received during the national state of emergency.

VBA Response: Concur. VBA is updating COVID-19 related guidance to clarify the date of receipt for affected claims without a postmark. Further, VBA anticipates publishing a Federal Register notice with the updated policy by September 2020.

Target Completion Date: September 30, 2020.

For accessibility, the original format of this appendix has been modified to comply with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended

OIG Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

Contact	For more information about this report, please contact the Office of Inspector General at (202) 461-4720.
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