



# **Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General**

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## **Combined Assessment Program Review of the VA Regional Office San Diego, California**

## **Office of Inspector General**

### **Combined Assessment Program Reviews**

Combined Assessment Program (CAP) reviews are part of the Office of Inspector General's (OIG's) efforts to ensure that high-quality health care and benefits services are provided to our Nation's veterans. CAP reviews combine the knowledge and skills of the OIG's Offices of Healthcare Inspections, Audit, and Investigations to provide collaborative assessments of VA medical facilities and regional offices on a cyclical basis. The purposes of CAP reviews are to:

- Evaluate how well VA facilities are accomplishing their missions of providing veterans convenient access to high-quality medical and benefits services.
- Determine if management controls ensure compliance with regulations and VA policies, assist management in achieving program goals, and minimize vulnerability to fraud, waste, and abuse.
- Provide fraud and integrity awareness training to increase employee understanding of the potential for program fraud and the requirement to refer suspected criminal activity to the OIG.

In addition to this typical coverage, CAP reviews may examine issues or allegations referred by VA employees, patients, Members of Congress, or others.

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## **Executive Summary**

### **Introduction**

During the week of December 5–9, 2005, the Office of Inspector General (OIG) conducted a Combined Assessment Program (CAP) review of the VA Regional Office San Diego, CA. The regional office is part of the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) Western Area. The purpose of the review was to evaluate selected regional office operations, focusing on benefits claim processing and financial and administrative controls. During the review, we also provided fraud and integrity awareness training to 202 employees.

### **Results of Review**

The CAP review covered eight activities. The regional office complied with selected standards in three activities:

- Automated Information Systems (AIS) Security
- Benefits Delivery Network (BDN) Security
- Large Retroactive Payment Controls

We identified five activities that needed additional management attention. To improve operations, we made the following recommendations:

- Improve the processing of BDN system messages.
- Promptly reduce benefit payments to incarcerated veterans.
- Promptly complete fiduciary accounting analyses and improve accuracy of Fiduciary and Field Examination (F&FE) processing.
- Ensure data accuracy of Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program information management systems.
- Strengthen administrative controls over the Government Purchase Card Program.

This report was prepared under the direction of Ms. Janet Mah, Director, and Ms. Tamara Jacobson, CAP Review Team Leader, Los Angeles Audit Operations Division.

## **Western Area and Regional Office Directors Comments**

The Western Area and Regional Office Directors agreed with the CAP review findings and recommendations and provided acceptable improvement plans. (See Appendixes A and B, pages 9–13, for the full text of the Directors’ comments.) We will follow up on the planned actions until they are completed.

*(original signed by:)*

JON A. WOODITCH  
Deputy Inspector General

## Introduction

### Regional Office Profile

**Organization and Programs.** The regional office provides compensation and pension (C&P), VR&E, and burial benefits to eligible veterans, dependents, and survivors who reside in the southern California counties of Imperial, Riverside, and San Diego. The regional office also provides VR&E services at satellite offices in the cities of Riverside and Hemet and operates an outbased Benefits Delivery at Discharge program at the Camp Pendleton Marine Corps Base and Miramar Marine Corps Air Station. The estimated veteran population served by the regional office is 432,000.

**Resources.** In fiscal year (FY) 2005, regional office general operating expenditures were about \$15.9 million. As of November 2005, the regional office had 206 full-time equivalent employees.

**Workload.** During FY 2005, the regional office authorized approximately \$610 million in C&P payments to 71,418 beneficiaries. As of October 2005, the regional office had 1,667 participants in the VR&E program and provided fiduciary oversight for approximately 1,180 incompetent veterans and other beneficiaries.

### Objectives and Scope of the CAP Review

**Objectives.** CAP reviews are one element of the OIG's efforts to ensure that our Nation's veterans receive high-quality VA health care and benefits services. The objectives of the CAP review are to:

- Conduct recurring evaluations of selected health care facility and regional office operations focusing on patient care, quality management, benefits, and financial and administrative controls.
- Provide fraud and integrity awareness training to increase employee understanding of the potential for program fraud and the requirement to refer suspected criminal activity to the OIG.

**Scope.** We reviewed selected benefits claim processing, financial, and administrative activities to evaluate the effectiveness of benefits delivery and general management controls. Benefits delivery is the process of ensuring that veterans' claims and requests for benefits and services are processed promptly and accurately. Management controls are the policies, procedures, and information systems used to safeguard assets, prevent errors and fraud, and ensure that organizational goals are met. The review covered regional office operations from FY 2004 to FY 2006 through October 2005 and was done in accordance with OIG standard operating procedures for CAP reviews.

In performing the CAP review, we interviewed managers and employees, reviewed beneficiary files and financial and administrative records, and inspected work areas. The review covered the following eight activities:

Automated Information Systems Security	Incarcerated Veterans Benefit Adjustments
Benefits Delivery Network Security	Large Retroactive Payment Controls
Fiduciary and Field Examinations	System Messages
Government Purchase Card Program	Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment

Activities needing improvement are discussed in the Opportunities for Improvement section (pages 3–8). In this report we make recommendations for improvement. Recommendations pertain to issues that are significant enough to be monitored by the OIG until corrective actions are implemented. For the activities not discussed in the Opportunities for Improvement section, we did not identify any reportable deficiencies.

During the review, we also provided fraud and integrity awareness briefings to 202 regional office employees. These briefings covered procedures for reporting suspected criminal activity to the OIG and included case-specific examples illustrating procurement fraud, false claims, conflicts of interest, and bribery.

### **Follow-Up to Previous CAP Review Recommendations**

As part of this review, we followed up on recommendations resulting from our prior CAP review of the regional office (*Combined Assessment Program Review of the VA Regional Office San Diego, California*, Report No. 03-02906-116, March 22, 2004). The prior CAP review identified that improvements were needed in several activities including the processing of benefit adjustments, fiduciary field examinations and accountings, and VR&E program data integrity. Our December 2005 CAP review found that the regional office had implemented new procedures and processes for many of these activities, but improvements were still needed in fiduciary field examinations and accountings and the VR&E program. (See the Opportunities for Improvement section, pages 5–7.)

## Results of Review

### Opportunities for Improvement

#### System Messages – Processing of Benefits Delivery Network System Messages Needed Improvement

**Condition Needing Improvement.** Veterans Service Center (VSC) staff did not promptly process BDN<sup>1</sup> system messages or properly adjust awards. The BDN system generates various system and diary messages that indicate when benefit adjustments or record corrections are needed. VBA policy requires regional offices to establish automated control<sup>2</sup> over the system messages within 7 days of receipt. The prompt processing of system messages ensures that needed benefit adjustments are made and reduces the overpayment and underpayment of benefits.

We reviewed 162 claims files related to all death match, school attendance, and dependency questionnaire system messages generated from July–September 2005 and determined that VSC staff properly processed death match and school attendance messages. However, 88 (78 percent) of the 113 dependency questionnaire system messages we reviewed were not placed under control within 7 days. Of these 88 messages, 65 (74 percent) were processed more than 30 days after their receipt, 10 (11 percent) were processed between 8 and 30 days after their receipt, and no action had been taken on the remaining 13 (15 percent). Overpayments totaling as much as \$264,261 could result if the regional office does not validate the dependency award amounts related to these 13 messages.

Although the VSC Manager had instituted new procedures to handle system messages after the previous CAP review, these procedures did not ensure system messages were effectively or promptly controlled and processed. Individual team members were delegated responsibility for system message processing, but there were no controls to ensure the processing was completed and related benefit adjustments were made. The VSC Manager stated he intends to implement a new system to centralize control and accountability of incoming system messages.

**Recommendation 1.** We recommended that the Western Area Director ensure that the Regional Office Director require VSC staff to (a) establish control over BDN system

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<sup>1</sup> BDN is VBA's main automated processing system for all C&P awards and related actions. BDN contains C&P master record information for all veterans and beneficiaries and generates the information needed to issue benefit payments.

<sup>2</sup> VBA policy defines automated control as the input of system messages in an automated program called the SHARE program. Regional office employees use SHARE to establish a record of the pending actions which are due for specific claims. SHARE automatically creates data on pending actions in BDN and VBA's corporate database which VBA and the regional offices use for C&P claims case management activities.



messages within 7 days and (b) complete necessary actions to promptly process and, where appropriate, adjust benefit payments.

The Western Area and Regional Office Directors agreed with the findings and recommendations and reported that all BDN system messages are logged in at the VSC management level and distributed to the appropriate staff to ensure the most expeditious handling. A system has been implemented to ensure prompt feedback when the system message has been processed and the appropriate end product has been established. VSC management responsible for this system will ensure applicable timeliness standards are met, and a VSC management monthly reporting requirement has also been instituted. The improvement plans are acceptable, and we will follow up on the planned actions until they are completed.

### **Incarcerated Veterans — Benefit Payments Needed To Be Promptly Reviewed and Adjusted**

**Condition Needing Improvement.** VSC management needed to improve the timeliness of benefit payment reviews and adjustments for incarcerated veterans. Under Federal law, a veteran or beneficiary imprisoned in a Federal, state, or local penal institution within the United States is subject to a reduction or discontinuance of C&P benefits. VA has agreements with the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) and the Social Security Administration (SSA) under which VA is provided periodic listings of inmates who may also be VA beneficiaries. VBA policy requires VSC staff to review these listings and adjust benefit payments for veterans or other beneficiaries who have been incarcerated more than 60 days and who meet benefit adjustment criteria.

For the period September 2004–September 2005, VSC had 7 BOP and 13 SSA listings that identified 248 inmates who were possible VA beneficiaries. We compared these listings with the BDN Master Records and confirmed that 114 (46 percent) of the 248 inmates were veterans or other beneficiaries whose C&P benefits may have required adjustments. Our review of the claims files showed 10 (9 percent) of the 114 veterans or other beneficiaries required due process or the finalization of benefit adjustments. Nine of these 10 veterans or other beneficiaries may have received overpayments, and 1 may have received an underpayment.

If VSC confirms the incarceration of these 10 veterans or other beneficiaries through the end of November 2005, and there are no apportionments for dependents, net overpayments could total as much as \$85,442. Prompt actions to review and adjust benefit payments for incarcerated veterans or other beneficiaries could prevent or significantly reduce overpayments. The VSC Post-Determination Coach stated that due to a shortage of staff and higher workload priorities within VSC, staff had been unable to promptly review incarcerated veteran information and complete related benefit adjustments.

**Recommendation 2.** We recommended that the Western Area Director ensure that the Regional Office Director require VSC staff to (a) promptly review BOP and SSA listings and initiate due process for incarcerated veterans or other beneficiaries and (b) if appropriate, promptly adjust benefits and process any related apportionment claims.

The Western Area and Regional Office Directors agreed with the findings and recommendations and reported that the procedures to address Recommendation 1 will also incorporate the BOP and SSA listings. Additionally, VSC management will maintain oversight to ensure timely due process and adjustment actions are taken, and oversight measures will be reviewed regularly as part of the VSC Workload Management Plan. The improvement plans are acceptable, and we will follow up on the planned actions until they are completed.

## **Fiduciary and Field Examination Activities — Timeliness of Accountings and Processing Accuracy Needed Improvement**

**Conditions Needing Improvement.** VSC management needed to ensure that F&FE staff improved the timeliness of analyses of accountings and fiduciary processing accuracy. In order to protect the benefits of incompetent veterans and beneficiaries, VBA policy requires F&FE staff to monitor fiduciaries' management of their estates. Federal fiduciaries are required to submit periodic accountings that list the veterans' or beneficiaries' assets, income, and expenses, and F&FE staff are required to analyze these accountings within 14 days of receipt. Also, the FY 2005 performance appraisal plans for VBA's Regional Office Directors required the regional offices to have an 85 percent accuracy score for fiduciary processing compliance as measured by VBA's Systematic Technical Accuracy Review (STAR). This accuracy standard was established to ensure the appropriate processing of fiduciary activities, such as accountings and field examinations, and the protection of the interests of incompetent VBA recipients.

We reviewed a sample of 15 Principal Guardianship Folders (PGFs) and the FY 2005 "STAR" report for fiduciary accuracy data and found improvements were needed in 2 areas.

Timeliness of Accountings. The FY 2005 "Completed Accountings" report for Federal fiduciary cases from VBA's automated Fiduciary-Beneficiary System showed that 239 (84 percent) of 284 accountings were not analyzed within 14 days of receipt. Of the 10 Federal fiduciary PGFs we reviewed, 5 contained accountings that had not been analyzed within 14 days. Of these five PGFs, three had accountings which exceeded the required timeliness standard by more than 3 months. The F&FE Coach stated this timeliness problem was due to limited F&FE staffing and higher workload priorities within VSC.

Accuracy Rate. The FY 2005 "STAR" report showed the regional office's F&FE staff received an accuracy score of 80 percent for complying with VBA fiduciary processing

requirements compared to the national standard of 85 percent. According to VSC management, the regional office did not meet the national standard because staff relied on national findings to identify deficiencies and did not perform consistent internal quality reviews to ensure the accuracy of F&FE processing.

**Recommendation 3.** We recommended that the Western Area Director ensure that the Regional Office Director require F&FE staff to (a) analyze accountings within the required timeliness standard and (b) institute quality control measures to ensure the accuracy of fiduciary processing and to meet the required national standard.

The Western Area and Regional Office Directors agreed with the findings and recommendations and reported that VSC management implemented new procedures to ensure they analyze the accountings within established time frames. In addition, the Public Contact Team Coach is conducting quality reviews based on individual performance standards, and new weekly reporting requirements to VSC management will ensure quality and timeliness standards are met. The improvement plans are acceptable, and we will follow up on the planned actions until they are completed.

## **Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program — Data Accuracy Needed Improvement**

**Condition Needing Improvement.** VR&E management needed to improve the accuracy of program data in WINRS.<sup>3</sup> The VR&E program provides services and assistance to veterans with service-connected disabilities so that they can obtain and maintain suitable employment. Regional offices use WINRS to track each veteran's status as they progress through the VR&E program. Generally, veterans who actively pursue higher education or other training programs should move sequentially from applicant status to evaluation and planning status, rehabilitation to employment status, and employment status to rehabilitated status. Veterans who are temporarily inactive in the program should be assigned to interrupted status. Veterans who leave the program and have not been rehabilitated should be placed in discontinued status.

To determine whether veterans received timely and appropriate VR&E services, we reviewed 40 of the active 1,285 Counseling, Evaluation, and Rehabilitation (CERS) cases listed on the October 2005 "Chapter 31 Veterans In Open Case Status" report. The cases included 12 from applicant status, 13 from evaluation and planning status, and 15 from rehabilitation to employment status. VBA policy requires WINRS data to be accurate so that regional office VR&E staff can effectively track and manage their caseloads and VBA officials can monitor the effectiveness of regional office VR&E programs.

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<sup>3</sup> WINRS is VR&E's electronic case management system. The name is derived from the first initials of the regional offices where it was piloted: Winston-Salem, NC; Indianapolis, IN; Newark, NJ; Roanoke, VA; and Seattle, WA.

We compared WINRS data with information contained in the CER files and BDN and found that V&RE staff had not properly updated WINRS to reflect the veterans' current VR&E program status. For example, 4 (33 percent) of the 12 applicant status cases we reviewed had not been updated in WINRS to show that the veterans were now in evaluation and planning or discontinued status. Inaccuracies in the veterans' program status classifications and status dates in WINRS impede the effective monitoring of VR&E activities at the regional office and within VBA.

**Recommendation 4.** We recommended that the Western Area Director ensure that the Regional Office Director require VR&E staff to (a) promptly correct identified inaccuracies in WINRS and (b) review, verify, and update WINRS data.

The Western Area and Regional Office Directors agreed with the findings and recommendations and reported that the VR&E program initiated a systematic review of all active cases to ensure data in both BDN and WINRS is consistent with the CERS file. Case managers are reviewing cases for inconsistencies and will verify information through personal contact with veterans and ensure data systems and CERS reflect consistent information. In addition, VR&E management will verify the consistency of data recorded in BDN, WINRS, and the CERS file as part of their local Quality Review process. The improvement plans are acceptable, and we will follow up on the planned actions until they are completed.

## **Government Purchase Card Program — Controls Needed To Be Strengthened**

**Condition Needing Improvement.** The Purchase Card Coordinator needed to strengthen controls over the administration of the Government Purchase Card Program. During FY 2005, 21 cardholders made 1,134 purchases totaling \$410,043. We reviewed a sample of 50 purchase card transactions from this period and identified an area for improvement.

VA policy prohibits cardholders from splitting purchases to avoid exceeding their authorized single purchase limit. Our review of 50 purchase card transactions, valued at \$53,158, identified a cardholder who split 4 purchases totaling \$12,883 into 8 transactions to avoid exceeding her \$2,500 single purchase spending limit. The cardholder, a VR&E case manager, split the purchases so that she could purchase computer equipment for four veterans who lived in remote locations. The average cost of the computer equipment needed by each of the veterans was about \$3,221. VR&E management acknowledged that the case manager needed a higher single purchase limit in order to effectively carry out her case management responsibilities and had initiated actions to have the case manager's spending limit increased at the time of the CAP review.

**Recommendation 5.** We recommended that the Western Area Director ensure that the Regional Office Director require cardholders to (a) have purchase card limits that allow them to effectively carry out their duties and responsibilities and (b) adhere to VA policy which prohibits cardholders from splitting purchases to avoid purchase card spending limits.

The Western Area and Regional Office Directors agreed with the findings and recommendations and reported that the cardholder was counseled and attended Simplified Acquisition Procedures training. All cardholders received refresher training and approving officials have been reminded that they are required to thoroughly review and reconcile statements and the Buying Log-Sheets. A review of all purchase card limits has been completed to ensure employees have the appropriate purchase card limits needed to effectively carry out their responsibilities. In addition, managers will conduct Quarterly Focus Reviews to improve Purchase Card Program oversight. The improvement plans are acceptable, and we will follow up on the planned actions until they are completed.

## Western Area Director Comments

**Department of  
Veterans Affairs**

**Memorandum**

**Date:** 3/17/06  
**From:** Western Area Office Director (20F4)  
**Subject:** VA Regional Office San Diego, California  
**To:** **Director, Los Angeles Audit Operation Division  
(52LA)**

I reviewed the Draft Report of the CAP review VA Regional Office (RO) San Diego. As the Western Area Director, I appreciate your feedback from the review.

I believe that the San Diego Regional Office has implemented appropriate procedures to address areas of concern that you have identified.

Again, thank you for your review. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at (602) 627-2746.

Thank you,

*(original signed by:)*  
Diana M. Rubens

Western Area Director

## Regional Office Director Comments

**Department of  
Veterans Affairs**

**Memorandum**

**Date:** 03/17/06

**From:** Director, VA Regional Office San Diego, California  
(377/00)

**Subject:** VA Regional Office San Diego, California

**To:** Director, Los Angeles Audit Operations Division (52LA)

1. The San Diego Regional Office submits the enclosed response to the Draft Report of the Combined Assessment Program (CAP) Review conducted at this office during the week of December 5-9, 2005.
2. We appreciate the analysis provided by the audit team. Their findings along with our corrective actions provide opportunity to improve our operations.
3. Should you have any question regarding our reply, please contact me at (619) 400-5400.

*(original signed by:)*

LILY D. FETZER

**Director Comments  
to Office of Inspector General's Report**

The following Director's comments are submitted in response to the recommendations in the Office of Inspector General Report:

**OIG Recommendations**

**Recommendation 1.** We recommend that the Western Area Director ensure that the Regional Office Director requires VSC staff to (a) establish control over BDN system messages within 7 days and (b) complete necessary actions to promptly process and, where appropriate, adjust benefit payments.

**Concur**                      **Target Completion Date:** January 2006

All BDN system messages are logged in at the VSCM staff level. They are then distributed to the appropriate CPI Team to ensure the most expeditious handling. A system is in place to ensure prompt feedback when the system message has been processed and the appropriate end product has been established. The VSCM staff oversight of this control system will ensure applicable timeliness standards have been adhered to. A monthly reporting requirement to the VSCM has also been instituted.

**Recommendation 2.** We recommend that the Western Area Director ensure that the Regional Office Director requires VSC staff to (a) promptly review BOP and SSA listings and initiate due process for incarcerated veterans or other beneficiaries and (b) if appropriate, promptly adjust benefits and process any related apportionment claims.

**Concur**                      **Target Completion Date:** January 2006



The RO procedures outlined in Recommendation 1 incorporate the BOP and SSA listings. Controls are maintained at the VSCM staff level to ensure distribution of lists is accomplished timely. Additionally, VSCM staff will maintain oversight such that timely due process and adjustment actions are taken. Oversight measures will be reviewed regularly as part of the Service Center Workload Management Plan.

**Recommendation 3.** We recommend that the Western Area Director ensure that the Regional Office Director requires F&FE staff to (a) analyze accountings within the required timeliness standard and (b) institute quality control measures to ensure the accuracy of fiduciary processing and to meet the required national standard.

**Concur**                      **Target Completion Date:** January 2006

VSC management implemented new procedures to ensure reviews of accountings are audited within established timeframes. Local quality reviews are being conducted by the Public Contact Team Coach based on individual performance standards. New weekly reporting requirements to the VSCM will ensure quality and timeliness standards are met.

**Recommendation 4.** We recommend that the Western Area Director ensure that the Regional Office Director requires VR&E staff to (a) promptly correct identified inaccuracies in WINRS and (b) review, verify, and update WINRS data.

**Concur**                      **Target Completion Date:** January 2006

The San Diego VR&E Division initiated a systematic review of all active cases to insure that data in both BDN and CWINRS is consistent with the CER file. Case managers are reviewing cases for inconsistencies. They will review files whenever personal or telephone contact with a Chapter 31 participant is made outside of the regularly planned supervisory contact. While conducting supervisory visits, case managers will verify information through the personal contact and then insure that the data systems, and CER reflect consistent information.

The case managers will correct any rejects in CWINRS to ensure that the data in both systems and the CER are consistent. Review of recorded data is now part of the case managers on-going responsibility. In addition, VR&E management will verify the consistency of data recorded in BDN, CWINRS and the CER file as part of our local Quality Review process.

**Recommendation 5.** We recommend that the Western Area Director ensure that the Regional Office Director requires cardholders to (a) have purchase card limits that allow them to effectively carry out their duties and responsibilities and (b) adhere to VA policy which prohibits cardholders from splitting purchases to avoid purchase card spending limits.

**Concur**                      **Target Completion Date:** December 2005

The San Diego Regional Office appreciates OIG's validation of a previous finding identified by the Regional Office in July 2005. Discrepancies on purchase card statements were identified and an extensive program review was completed. Corrective action was initiated based on our review. The employee involved received both verbal and written counseling and attended "Simplified Acquisition Procedures" training. The ratification process was completed for all split purchases. A new Agency Organization Program Coordinator (A/OPC) was appointed. Approving Officials have been put on notice to thoroughly review and reconcile cycle statements and cycle Buying Log-Sheet. Processes for review were strengthened. Heightened oversight is in place including the Quarterly Focus Reviews conducted by the Assistant Director and Support Services Chief. Refresher training has been provided to all purchase card holders. A review of all purchase card limits was completed and employees have appropriate purchase card limits to effectively carry out their responsibilities.

## Monetary Benefits in Accordance with IG Act Amendments

<u>Recommendation</u>	<u>Explanation of Benefit(s)</u>	<u>Better Use of Funds</u>
1	Benefit adjustments resulting from system messages should be processed.	\$264,261
2	Benefit payments to certain veterans who were incarcerated should be reduced.	85,442
	Total	\$349,703

## OIG Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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OIG Contact	Janet Mah (310) 268-4335
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Acknowledgments	Julio Arias Davis Beasley Carin Childress Andrew Hamilton Tamara Jacobson Rosetta Kim Tae Kim Andrea Lui Rebeccalynn Staples
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## Report Distribution

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