

VA Office of Inspector General

OFFICE OF AUDITS AND EVALUATIONS



Department of Veterans Affairs

*Review of
Alleged Misuse of
eBenefits Accounts by a
Supportive Services for
Veteran Families Provider*

May 5, 2016
15-01951-281

ACRONYMS

FY	Fiscal Year
OIG	Office of Inspector General
SSVF	Supportive Services for Veteran Families
VA	Department of Veterans Affairs
VHA	Veterans Health Administration
VOA	Volunteers of America

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Highlights: Review of Alleged Misuse of eBenefits Accounts by a VA Supportive Services for Veteran Families Provider

Why We Did This Review

We performed this review in response to allegations received through the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Office of Inspector General Hotline in November 2014. This review sought to assess the merits of allegations of misuse of veterans' eBenefits accounts by a Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) provider. Allegedly, Volunteers of America in Durango, Colorado (VOA Durango), used a veteran's private information on the eBenefits Web site to obtain documents including, but not limited to, his Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty (DD Form 214). In addition, the complainant alleged a VOA Durango staff member established eBenefits accounts using private information without the veteran's consent.

What We Found

We found no evidence that VOA Durango staff or management misused veterans' private information to access eBenefits accounts, or created eBenefits accounts without a veteran's knowledge.

We reviewed and analyzed dates of veterans' SSVF participation and reviewed eBenefits accounts associated with the participants listed in the allegation. We reviewed documentation in the participants' files, including intake forms, eligibility determinations, DD Forms 214, and the

services provided to the participants. We reviewed internal controls in place to prevent unauthorized creation and access to eBenefits accounts. We found the controls for establishing an eBenefits account required two levels of authentication to access a veteran's DD Form 214 used to verify military service. We found no evidence in the case files that eligibility documents were obtained from eBenefits accounts without the veteran's knowledge.

What We Recommended

We made no recommendations and the Director of the New Mexico VA Health Care System did not have any comments on this report.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gary K. Abe".

GARY K. ABE
Acting Assistant Inspector General
for Audits and Evaluations

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INTRODUCTION

- Objective** Our objective was to determine if a Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program provider, Volunteers of America's Colorado Branch, Southwest Colorado Office in Durango, Colorado (VOA Durango), misused veterans' private information to access eBenefits accounts and established eBenefits accounts without the veteran's consent. The New Mexico VA Health Care System provides veterans with access to health care in New Mexico and southwest Colorado.
- Volunteers of America** Volunteers of America (VOA) is a national, nonprofit, faith-based organization dedicated to helping those in need rebuild their lives and reach their full potential. VOA has more than 30 distinct human service programs throughout the state of Colorado, including housing and health care.
- DD Form 214** The *Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty* (DD Form 214) contains information normally needed to verify military service for benefits, retirement, employment, and membership in veterans' organizations. SSVF and other programs use this form to establish eligibility for VA services.
- eBenefits Accounts** eBenefits is a joint VA and Department of Defense Web portal that provides resources and self-service capabilities to veterans, service members and their families to research, access, and manage their VA and military benefits and personal information.
- SSVF** The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) awards grants through SSVF to private non-profit organizations and consumer cooperatives that provide a range of supportive services to eligible low-income veterans and their families. Supportive services include outreach, case management, and assistance in obtaining VA benefits, and coordinating other public benefits available in the community. The goal of the SSVF Program is to rapidly re-house homeless veterans and their families, and prevent homelessness for those veterans at imminent risk.
- Criteria** SSVF Program participants must be either a veteran or a member of a family in which the head of household (or the spouse of the head of household) is a veteran. To determine eligibility, providers should obtain a copy of the DD Form 214, or other proof such as a current statement of service. Veterans can obtain documents needed to verify eligibility online through eBenefits enrollment, online application for VHA services, or the DD Form 214 online Web site.
- Other Information** Appendix A provides details on our scope and methodology.

RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding **Volunteers of America in Durango Did Not Misuse Veterans' Private Information To Access or Establish eBenefits Accounts**

Allegation In November 2014, the VA Office of Inspector General received an allegation of misuse of veterans' eBenefits accounts by a Supportive Services for Veteran Families provider. Allegedly, VOA Durango used a veteran's private information on the eBenefits Web site to obtain documents, including, but not limited to, his DD Form 214. In addition, the complainant alleged a VOA staff member established eBenefits accounts using private information without a veteran's consent.

We did not substantiate the allegation that VOA Durango misused veterans' private information on the eBenefits Web site or established eBenefits accounts without a veteran's consent.

What We Did To address the allegation, we interviewed the complainant and the Director of eBenefits, and reviewed controls to establish a new eBenefits account. We also conducted an unannounced site visit at VOA Durango to assess the merits of the allegation. We reviewed and analyzed dates of SSVF participation and reviewed eBenefits accounts associated with the participants listed in the allegation. We reviewed documentation in the participants' files, including intake forms, eligibility determinations, DD Forms 214, and the services provided to the participants.

Furthermore, we visited the VOA Colorado Branch, located in Denver, because VOA Durango is one of their satellite offices. We interviewed the Associate Director at the VOA Colorado Branch. We reviewed internal controls in place to prevent unauthorized creation and access to eBenefits accounts. We tested the access controls by creating an eBenefits account for a member of the audit team who is also a veteran.

What We Found The complainant alleged that a VOA file review found 6 of 35 veteran files did not include the participants' DD Form 214, and that VOA staff created eBenefits accounts to obtain copies. For this allegation to be substantiated, these participants would have had eBenefits accounts created by the VOA staff to replace the missing documents. On the contrary, we found that four of the six veterans associated with the files did not have an eBenefits account. For the two files with an eBenefits account, we determined one account was established before the veteran entered the SSVF Program and the veteran's DD Form 214 was included in the file. The other file, while missing a DD Form 214, included a letter from VA establishing the veteran's eligibility, and, therefore, did not require the DD Form 214.

The complainant also alleged that fraudulent eBenefits accounts were created after veterans left the SSVF Program. We determined that 35 of the 87 participants named in the allegation (40 percent) had an associated eBenefits account. Seven of 35 participants had eBenefits accounts that were established after the participants had left the SSVF Program. We found no evidence in the case files that eligibility documents were obtained from eBenefits accounts without a veteran's knowledge. Furthermore, one veteran specifically named in the allegation did not have an eBenefits account.

**Test of
eBenefit
Controls**

We created an eBenefits account for a member of our audit team, a veteran, to determine the sufficiency of controls in preventing unauthorized access to the system. The eBenefits Web site has a two-level authentication control in place to reduce the risk of eBenefits account creation without a veteran's involvement. The first level provides access to basic information, such as lists of possible benefits and applying for VA health care. The second level includes access to DD Forms 214 and access to medical records; it also requires personal and historical information from the veteran's credit bureau report—information only the veteran would know. In addition, OIG Information Technology and Security auditors evaluated eBenefits security controls, during the 2014 Federal Information Security Management Act audit, and did not identify any significant security weaknesses.

Conclusion

Based on our interviews, examination of the participant files, and review of eBenefits system controls, we did not substantiate the allegation. We did not find that VOA Durango staff or management created eBenefits accounts without the veteran's knowledge.

We made no recommendations and the Director of the New Mexico VA Health Care System did not have any comments on this report.

Appendix A Scope and Methodology

Scope and Methodology

We reviewed the records of the 87 participants in SSVF that VOA Durango provided regarding the allegation. Documentation reviewed included intake forms, eligibility determinations, DD Forms 214, and services provided. We conducted an unannounced site visit at VOA Durango. We analyzed the dates of SSVF participation, and eBenefits account creation for the 87 participants listed in the allegation. We tested the eBenefits access controls by establishing a valid eBenefits account. We interviewed the complainant and VOA staff.

To address the allegation, we interviewed the complainant and the Director of eBenefits, and reviewed the controls when establishing a new eBenefits account. We also conducted an unannounced site visit at VOA Durango to assess the merits of the allegation. We reviewed and analyzed dates of SSVF participation, and reviewed eBenefits accounts associated with the participants listed in the allegation. We reviewed documentation in the participants' files, including intake forms, eligibility determinations, DD Forms 214, and the services provided to the participants. Furthermore, we visited the VOA Colorado Branch, located in Denver, because VOA Durango is one of their satellite offices. We interviewed the Associate Director at the VOA Colorado Branch. We reviewed the internal controls in place to prevent unauthorized creation and access to eBenefits accounts. We tested the access controls by creating an eBenefits account for a member of the audit team who is also a veteran.

Data Reliability

The allegation included an Excel spreadsheet listing 87 veterans possibly affected. We confirmed that the list included veterans who entered the SSVF VOA Program from 2011 through 2014 by reviewing VOA claims files and confirming the list with SSVF Program officials.

Fraud Assessment

The allegation also included a claim that VOA Durango staff had created fraudulent eBenefits accounts after the veterans had left the SSVF Program. We reviewed program exit dates and found that seven participants had eBenefits accounts created after they had left the SSVF Program. However, after reviewing veteran case files, we found no indication of fraud.

Government Standards

We conducted this review in accordance with the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency's *Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation*.

Appendix B **OIG Contact and Staff Acknowledgments**

Contact	For more information about this report, please contact the Office of Inspector General at (202) 461-4720.
Acknowledgments	Cherie Palmer, Director Nilda Bueno Joseph DeAntonis David Lakoskey

Appendix C Report Distribution

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